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KOH, YONG SIANG EUGENE

Date of Birth — Date de naissance

Oct. 20 1948

Country of Birth — Lieu de naissance

SINGAPORE

Permanent Address — Résidence fixe

9259-91 STREET
EDMONTON
ALTA. T6C 3N7 CANADA

Title of Thesis — Titre de la thèse

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Name of Supervisor — Nom du directeur de thèse

PAUL ROBBERECHT

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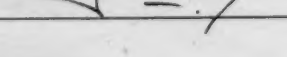

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.....

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ABSTRACT

To compare two novels of different cultures and time periods is a task of considerable difficulty. By undertaking such a comparison, this thesis seeks to reveal the similarities under the differences that exist between two such novels. One similarity that is worth noting is the use of characterization as a means of exposing the negative aspects of society. The main concern of this study is with women as sirens in the novels, and the way in which the female antagonists of *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus* are used to mirror the imperfections of Victorian England and sixteenth-century China.

One facet common to the societies of both England and China is the subservient social position of women to men. In such societies, the siren, then, is the woman who breaks from her traditional role of inferiority to become an opposing force to conventional mores. This thesis looks at the characters of Becky Sharp (*Vanity Fair*) and Golden Lotus (*The Golden Lotus*) with the view of examining these two sirennic characters in relation to the societies depicted in the two respective novels. Both Becky and Golden Lotus are antagonists who have broken the social limitations of their societies in their attempts to achieve greater ambitions. But these two characters are more than this. By detailing

their obsessed desires, whether it be for money or love, the authors of these two novels are, in fact, showing how the societies of these two cultures have supplanted spiritual values with decadent secular aspirations. Ironically, while these sirens reflect the inherent weaknesses of their societies, they are also in turn frustrated in their ambitions by the same social bounds they seek to escape from.

This thesis seeks to show how the novels of Victorian England and sixteenth-century China can give us greater insight into two characters not only as literary creations, but also as representatives of their respective societies. It does this by discussing the literary background of *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus*, by examining the societies depicted in these two novels, and by analyzing the characters of Becky and Golden Lotus as being the embodiments of sirennic values.

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Paul Robberecht for all that he has done for me. Also, my sincere thanks to the committee members, to my family, and to all my friends, particularly George "Josh" Bielby and Linus Asong, for their encouragement, support and help.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women, especially those of a patrilineal kinship system[1] such as that of England or China, have traditionally accepted a role subservient to that of men. Their submissiveness has earned them Coventry Patmore's famous epitaph "the angel in the house."[2] Their inferior social situation, however, has prompted writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill to advocate changes. The role of the ideal Victorian woman "is that of the submissive wife whose whole excuse for being was to love, honor, obey--and amuse--her lord and master, and to manage his household and bring up his children."[3] Clearly, Wollstonecraft saw this social inequality as early as 1792 when she wrote: "It is time to effect a revolution in female manners -- time to restore them their lost dignity.... I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre, real or usurped, extends not to me."[4]

Like their Western counterparts, Chinese women, too, have always been subject to a position socially inferior to

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[1]Peter B. Hammond, *An Introduction to Cultural and Social Anthropology*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1978, pp.204-207.
[2]Derek Patmore, *The Life and Times of Coventry Patmore*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1949, p.77.
[3]Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. Yale University Press, 1957, p.348.
[4]Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1929, pp.41-51.

that of their men till the beginning of the twentieth-century; they would be outcast as social evils if they attempted to break away from their "sex prison." As a result, when Chinese women were first initiating their self-liberation and advocating equal rights in the early 1900's, their movement marked them as rebels. This situation has been well dramatized by Chao Shu-li when she writes:

> ...[the mother-in-law's] curiosity made her go along to find out what a lot of young women together talked about at a meeting. Her investigations shocked her. The women wanted emancipation; they were against being beaten and sworn at by their mothers-in-law and husbands; they were against foot-binding; they wanted to gather firewood, fetch water, and till the fields; they wanted to do the same work and eat the same food as the men; they wanted to go to winter schools. In her view, this was rebellion.[1]

Such social disparity is clearly reflected in the literatures of both Chinese and Western cultures. Western literatures, particularly of the eighteenth- and the nineteenth-century, tend to treat women as angels victimized by their social circumstances in a male-dominated world. For, in a society in which they are made to suffer much subjugation, there is no room for individual intelligent endeavours by women; no place for them to exercise their intellectual superiority. As a result, angelic women who are constantly being exploited and betrayed so dominate literature of the period that when we are confronted with "sirennic" women, we experience a mild moral shock.

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[1]Chao Shu-li, "Meng Xiangying Stands Up", translated by Yau Woon Ma and Joseph Lau in *Rice Bowl Women*, ed., Dorothy Blair Shimer. New York: New American Library, 1982, pp.112-113.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the siren is a mythical being who first appeared in Homer's *The Odyssey*. Half-bird half-woman, she is said to have lured sailors to their destruction with her sweet songs and womanly charm. Probably because of her association with the sea, she is often confused with the mermaid and, after the medieval period, often appears as a fish-woman instead of a bird-woman. Gradually, her physical appearance lost its significance, and as the centuries progressed, any woman who embodied the attributes and motives of the siren often came to be referred to as a siren.

In the novel, the siren is invariably depicted as a woman who breaks away from social restraints and who takes advantage of her sex to emerge as an antagonistic force to current social norms. She is frequently seen by her society as a "moral deviant" and thus is a fitting character to play the role of a villain in the novel. As such, she is portrayed as aggressive, oppressive, and becomes a dissenter, a disruptive element responsible for the disintegration of families. For this, the reader is often more ready to condemn than to sympathize with her.

Two women who very effectively manifest these tendencies are Becky Sharp (*Vanity Fair*) and Golden Lotus (*The Golden Lotus*), and the objectives of this thesis will centre around these two women. The first objective is to examine how Thackeray and Hsiao depict these two women as "antagonists" in the societies of the novels they inhabit.

The second objective, directly related to the first, is to examine the role and effect of the siren as a major character in the novel.

At this point, the approach adopted in the examination of these characters needs some clarification.

The term "fiction" is defined as a fabrication, a deception, or a lie. Yet when reading a novel, we are often inclined to accept the imaginary world of the novelist as real. No fiction-writer, however, is able to reproduce a mirror-image of actual life; the best he can produce is a resemblance. Even when the novelist claims or pretends to be a faithful chronicler or biographer, as Defoe does in his works, and professes to be absolutely scientific in his depiction, as Thackeray does, we must recognize the fact that the characters who populate the world of his novel are still no more than a creation of his imagination. If we are to analyse fictitious characters against a realistic social context, our view and understanding of these characters may risk the danger of being distorted, unless we, as the readers, keep the two parameters distinct -- fiction and reality. Therefore, fictitious characters must be studied and analysed within the context of the fictitious world created by the novelist in order to determine their roles and effects in the novel.

This will be the approach adopted in the analyses of Becky and Golden Lotus: both characters will be examined in relation to the societies depicted in *Vanity Fair* and *The*

Golden Lotus. By so doing, we will be able to compare the siren with the other characters in the novel. This in turn has the added advantage of providing a broader perception of the structure of the society portrayed in the novel, as well as affording a better understanding of the social codes and motivations which hold the members of each society together.

My selection of *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus* for this study has been dictated by the fact that there is a fascinating similarity between the treatment of women in the novels, despite the fact that they belong to two vastly different cultures. It could even be added here that such a comparative study would help deepen and broaden our perception and appreciation of the similarities beneath the differences of Ming and Victorian cultures and literatures. As Laurenson and Swingewood say, literature

> ...is pre-eminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it. Thus the novel...can be seen as a faithful attempt to re-create the social world of man's relation with his family, with politics, with the State; it delineates too his roles within the family and other institutions, the conflicts and tensions between groups and social classes. ...as art, literature transcends mere description and objective scientific analysis, penetrating the surfaces of social life, showing the ways in which men and women experience society as feeling.'

This is because the characters who fill the realistic fiction of a civilisation may be likened to its population. Such characters often embody the types of a culture which become perceptible to us in literature. Thus, for example,

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'Laurenson, Diana and Swingewood, Alan, *The Sociology of Literature*. London: MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1972, p.12.

without the characters of Balzac, certain modes of life in nineteenth-century France may have remained abstract to us, thereby restricting and reducing our understanding of certain aspects of French social mores. That a study of this nature would promote better understanding between two cultures is the reason this thesis undertakes to compare two famous fictitious characters of Victorian and Ming literatures. Through the study of the two novels, we will discover the differences and similarities between the societies depicted in the novels of these two unrelated cultures, separated both in space and time. Becky of nineteenth-century England and Golden Lotus of sixteenth-century China are two obviously different characters operating in two different social spheres. But within the context of the two novels, they share one common feature: both are sirens who have broken social bounds in an attempt to achieve their ambitions.

It has to be admitted that emphasis on only one novel from each society cannot serve adequately as a reliable basis for a survey of, and grounds for a valid conclusion on, either society. But given the scope of this thesis, it also cannot be denied that these two novels embrace enough materials from which we can establish a better insight to an understanding of the two women, not only as literary creations, but also as representatives of the two societies, especially of Ming China in the sixteenth-century, since fewer studies have been done on it.

In the next chapter, I will discuss briefly the two novels and the literary background in which they were written. A comparative summary of the societies of *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus* will follow. This will serve as a framework and a basis for the analyses of Becky and Golden Lotus in the subsequent chapters. The Conclusion will compare the findings of the study, draw out the similarities and differences, and discuss the roles and effects of the two sirens as major characters in the novels.

II. THE LITERARY BACKGROUND

The life and work of William Makepeace Thackeray need little introduction. *Vanity Fair* was his first full length novel which was not published in a magazine, and its appearance brought the novelist overnight fame at the age of thirty-five. By this time, Thackeray had had about ten years of journalistic experience behind him, having published a miscellany of works such as verses, sketches, travelogues and reviews. Before *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray had contributed numerous sketches to *Punch* and had also written several longer works, such as *The Book of Snobs* and *Novels by Eminent Hands*, which are a series of satirical sketches. These sketches satirized the sensationalized Gothic romances of such celebrated writers as Bulwer Lytton and Walter Scott.[7]

Throughout his career, Thackeray had been preoccupied with the "real" in society. He had been disgusted with the romantic imagination of literary figures before him, as well as those who were his contemporaries. Popular literature of heroes and heroism, such as the Gothic romances, wearied him, as such romances invariably involve stock heroes, heroines, and villains.[8]

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[7]Juliet McMaster, English 555, University of Alberta, Winter 1983.

[8]*The Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Toronto: Coles Publishing Co., Ltd., p.114, defines a stock character as "a familiar

Gothic romances are often set in medieval castles with subterranean passages, and are "tales of mystery and horror, intended to chill the spine and curdle the blood."[9] The atmosphere evoked is one of terror and foreboding. The emphasis is generally "upon setting and story rather than upon character-delineation."[10] This genre of literature was popular in England during the eighteenth- and the nineteenth-century, and it is against such convention that Thackeray, by subtitling *Vanity Fair* "A Novel Without A Hero", publicly announced his break with the literary tradition of the day,

> because the specifically unheroic nature of man - and of woman, too, for all the ironic claims for that title alternately for Amelia and Becky - is his subject.[11]

Thackeray's chief concern was therefore with what he considered as the "actual" state of affairs of humanity. In a letter to David Masson, he further clarified his stance on literature by saying:

> ...the Art of Novels is to present Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality--in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically; but in a drawing room-drama a coat is a coat and a poker is a

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[9](cont'd)figure who appears regularly in certain literary forms." For example, in the Gothic romances, there are the stock characters of "the imperiled heroine, her gallant savior, and the mustache-twirling villain," whose characteristics are rarely developed or changed throughout the story.

[9]J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1977, p. 284.

[10]C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960, p. 215.

[11]Juliet McMaster, *Thackeray: The Major Novels*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971, p.31.

> poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics, not an embroidered tunic, nor a great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime weapon.'[12]

While there is no question as to who wrote *Vanity Fair*, the true authorship of *The Golden Lotus* has been a matter of much debate and speculation. Legends have it that it was written by one Wang Shih-cheng who used the manuscript as a lethal weapon for revenge. The story tells of the author's father being impeached by the corrupt Yen Sung who died in 1568. Dissatisfied with being deprived of the opportunity to take revenge on Yen Sung directly, Wang Shih-cheng conceived the idea of coating the corners of the pages of his finished manuscript with poison, and presented it to the son of his enemy, Yen Shih-fan. In those days, Chinese paper was extremely thin, and as a result the pages of the manuscript tended to stick together. It was then the usual practice to lick the fingers and turn the leaves of the book at the corner. By the time Yen Shih-fan finished the hundred-chapter novel, he had consumed so much poison that he fell dead.

Modern scholars such as Arthur Waley and Lai Ming, however, dismiss such accounts as "fairy-tales." Waley suggests Hsu Wei as the most likely candidate for the authorship of the novel. Hsu Wei (1521 - 1593) was a celebrated playwright who was familiar with the type of popular songs that can be found in *The Golden Lotus*. The question here is, would a person with the genius and

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[12]Gordon N. Ray, ed., *The Letters and Private Papers of W. M. Thackeray*, 4 volumes. Vol.II, pp.772-773.

intellect of Hsu Wei have condescended to write a fiction of such low culture and ordinary mentality as *The Golden Lotus*?'[13] Modern scholars have also ascribed the authorship of the novel to numerous other names of the time, but no one has yet been able to come to a conclusive solution to the problem. For present purposes, suffice it to say that *The Golden Lotus* was written by someone of the Ming Dynasty, and who was from the Lang Ling District of Shantung, using the pen-name of Hsiao Hsiao-sen.

China in the Ming Dynasty (1368 -1644 a.d.) experienced a considerably long period of political stability and economic prosperity. Conditions were then right for the development of various forms of art; and in the years between 1522 and 1593, the dynasty emerged as the golden age of the novels. The "four great amazing novels": *The Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, *The Water Margin* and *The Golden Lotus*, were all written during this period. While some critics, such as Yuan Chung-lang, consider *The Golden Lotus* inferior only to *The Water Margin*, others have contended that it is the best not only of these four, but of all literary works in contemporary Ming history. Whatever the reception may have been then, *The Golden Lotus* remains to this day one of the most popular Chinese classical novels.'[14]

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[13] P. D. Hanan, "Sources of the Chin P'ing Mei" in *Asia Major* (New Series), Vol. X, Pt.I, July 1963, pp. 39-49.

[14] The popularity of the story of Golden Lotus is evident from the fact that it has become almost a legend in itself. It has been sung as an opera; adapted into several movies as well as dramas. For example in the 1960's, there were at

"Chin P'ing Mei" is the phonetic transliteration of the novel's Chinese title. The author derived this title from the second names of three of the central female characters in the story: Chin (Gold) from Pan Chin Lien (Pan Golden Lotus); P'ing (Vase) from Li P'ing Erh (Lady of the Vase); and Mei (Plum) from Chun Mei (Spring Plum).'[15] First published in 1610, the story plots the lives and careers of these three women. The entire work consists of one hundred chapters with almost as many characters, and its appearance created a new genre in the development of Chinese fiction: the novel of manners.'[16]

It has been mentioned that apart from *The Golden Lotus*, there were three other "great amazing" novels written during the same period. In term of contents, *The Golden Lotus*, however, bears very little resemblance to them. While *The Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin* centre their interest in history, legends, and the exploits of heroes, and *The Journey West* is concerned with mythology, magic and the

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'[14](cont'd)least two films made in Hong Kong which were based on the story of Golden Lotus. The novel itself has been translated into German and at least twice into English.

'[15]Egerton translates this name as "Plum Blossom." For the purpose of this study, the text used will be based on *The Golden Lotus*, translated by Clement Egerton. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972. All subsequent references will be to this edition, and will be identified by the volume and page numbers.

'[16]"The novel of manners is a novel which has as its dominant forces "the social customs, manners, conventions, and habits of a definite social class at a particular time and place. In the *true* novel of manners, the social mores of a specific group are defined and described in detail and with great accuracy, and these mores become powerful controls over the characters." Hugh C. Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, p.324.

supernatural, *The Golden Lotus* dwells upon the daily life, routines and manners of the middle-class of Chinese urban society. It is essentially concerned with the situation of the individual in the society of the early Ming period. And because it is the first Chinese novel "to describe the life of the people realistically,"[1] it represents a major step in the development of Chinese novel-writing.

The novel takes its point of departure from an episode in *The Water Margin*.[2] In Chapter IX of Volume I, however, *The Golden Lotus* abandons its source and develops its own plot. Apart from *The Water Margin*, the novel also borrows from numerous other short stories, plays, crime cases, and popular songs.[3] However, *The Golden Lotus* is not dependent upon such borrowings for its plot development. Instead, these borrowings are utilized to enable the author to achieve his intended overall effect. For example, popular songs and song sequences are often employed to express the state of mind of characters, while certain crime cases are included and exploited in the portrayal of aspects of the nature of the characters.

Vanity Fair was published almost two and a half centuries after the appearance of *The Golden Lotus*, in 1847; and like *The Golden Lotus*, it emerged as a reaction against

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[1] Lai Ming, *A History of Chinese Literature*. London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1964, p. 307.

[2] Chapters XXII and XXIV of *The Water Margin* relate the story of Golden Lotus, and it is from this source that *The Golden Lotus* derives its point of departure.

[3] Patrick Hanan, "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel" in *The Far East: China and Japan*, eds. Douglas Grant and Millar MacLure. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961, p. 325.

the literary traditions of its time. By centering the narrative upon Amelia and Becky *after* their marriages, Thackeray was radically reacting against the then popular convention that a tale should follow the adventure of the hero and heroine on their way to the church altar. Even the depiction of his female protagonists is a reaction against conventional approach to the portrayal of heroines of the day: his "angel" is dark and taller than his "siren" who is fair and petite. As a result, *Vanity Fair* "was quite as revolutionary a book in the development of Victorian fiction as *Ulysses* has proven to be in the development of modern fiction."[20]

Studies of characters in both novels are done externally as the narrators rarely expose the inner thoughts of the characters. Instead, we learn and understand them by the allusive images that are associated with them, and by the descriptions of their modes of dress, their behavior, and their relationships.

In *The Golden Lotus*, there are numerous narrative intrusions. The narrator displays a personal interest in the characters that he portrays, so that the study of characters becomes more personal. Often, characters such as the three women whose names form the title are more complex than they first seem to be, and they, therefore, appear psychologically convincing. Instead of the idealized heroes with heroic exploits of the other three epics mentioned,

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[20]Gordon N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1955, p. 388.

they are on the low mimetic level as life-size ordinary people struggling for money and social power.

As far as *The Golden Lotus* is concerned, in depicting the characters' attempts to vent their frustration and their hopes to fulfill their needs and expectations, not only does the novel reveal some aspects of social reality, but it also becomes an important source of information about Ming society. One example is that Hsi-men and his household clearly represent a newly emerging social group--the powerful merchant-gentry class. Due to its economic power, this new group had gradually achieved social prominence and political influence in Ming China by bribing the officials at the top and exploiting the poor below.[2]

Just as the household of Hsi-men represents the society of *The Golden Lotus*, Vanity Fair is a microscopic representation of the well-to-do England of Thackeray's day. Intent on exposing the snobbery and the concerns with money and social status displayed by contemporary English society, Thackeray has the narrator follow the careers of Becky and Amelia as they leave school together to fight for their places in the world, till each finds the position in society which rightfully belongs to her.

In the process of showing his characters' struggles, Thackeray fills the novel with an abundance of authentic details. He describes with profusion the daily routines, manners, pleasures and pains of his characters. In this way,

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[2]Charles O. Hucker, *The Traditional Chinese State In Ming Times*. Tucson: University of Arizona, 1961, pp.30-37.

Vanity Fair may also be identified as a novel of manners.

As in *The Golden Lotus*, the study of characters is done externally: characters are portrayed in a set of social relationships with one another. Although the story is told by an omniscient narrator, the narrator often chooses not to exercise the full extent of the privileges afforded by his omniscience: he rarely goes into the minds of the characters to expose their thoughts. Instead, characters are revealed through imagery, and by their behavior and relationships.

At this point, it is pertinent to distinguish the role of Thackeray as the author of *Vanity Fair*, and the role of the narrator of the story. Thackeray as the author creates the narrator and affords him the prerogative to mingle freely throughout the narrative, and to comment on the characters. As such, the narrator becomes a character in the narrative, but remains a non-participant in the sense that we are unable to identify him in the sets of relationship depicted in the novel. But we feel his presence in the fair, even as he stands apart from the events. In short, he plays the role of the showman: he observes, shows, and tells us about each character involved in the drama of Vanity Fair, but remains detached from the actions of the novel. Because of his freedom to move through time and space, he brings together the worlds of Becky and Amelia, and synthesizes the panorama of life in Vanity Fair, thereby forging an unity to the novel. As the author, Thackeray is behind the scenes as the puppetmaster manipulating the puppets, including the

narrator, and the events.

In *The Golden Lotus*, besides bringing the world within the perception of Golden Lotus, the narrator goes beyond the convention of concluding the story with the deaths of the main protagonists to the final downfall of Hsi-men's household. This, we see, is necessary to resolve his vision of the moral of retribution. The story therefore resolves not only the lives of Golden Lotus and Hsi-men, but also those of the other members of the household. In short, the final collapse of a powerful and influential family reinforces the moral of retribution which Hsiao speaks of in his preface to the novel.

From the numerous intrusions into the narratives which we find in both novels, a remarkable resemblance is discernible between the moral responsibilities of the two novelists. In his work on Thackeray, Anthony Trollope maintains that the responsibility of the novelist is to "preach his sermons with the same purpose as the clergyman...and to make virtue alluring and vice ugly, while he charms his reader instead of wearying them" and that "it is the business of a novel to instruct in morals and to amuse."[23] Thackeray's attitude towards his own responsibility as a novelist is contradictory. In "Before the Curtain", he tries to break away from the novelist's traditional responsibility by declaring: "I have no other moral than this to tag to the present story," and that is,

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[23]Anthony Trollope, *Thackeray*. London: MacMillan and Company, 1879, p. 202.

having wandered through the fair, "you come home you sit down, in a sober, contemplative, not uncharitable frame of mind, and apply yourself to your books or your business."[23] In spite of this declaration that there is no moral lesson to be learnt from *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray proceeds to make numerous authorial intrusions which are of a high moral tone through the medium of the narrator. To explain such intrusions, Thackeray later speaks of his works as being a "sort of confidential talk between the reader and the writer."[24] In *Vanity Fair*, the reader may not always be conscious of his presence, but Thackeray does not hide the fact that he, as the author, is in charge. His position as author-moralist is further reinforced at the end of Chapter VII when he has the narrator say:

> ...the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover (an accurate portrait of your humble servant)...is bound to speak the truth....As we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them.[25]

Thus in spite of his initial declaration, Thackeray still remains a strong moralist at heart. One good example occurs during the course of the narrator's description of Becky:

> The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face. Frown at

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[23] *Vanity Fair*, p. 5.
[24] W. M. Thackeray, *Pendennis*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1879, p. 202.
[25] W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*. Eds., Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963, p.80. (All subsequent references will be to this edition of the novel, and will be identified with the title followed by the page number.)

> it, and it will in turn look sourly upon you; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly, kind companion; and so let all young persons take their choice. This is certain, that if the world neglected Miss Sharp, she never was known to have done a good action in behalf of anybody.[26]

We may read in it not only a description of his technique in portraying the society of *Vanity Fair* as seen through and reflected by the eyes of one character, but also the moral comment "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Assuming the latter understanding, it can be seen that Thackeray, in spite of all, was still unable to evade the moral responsibilities which Trollope maintains that a writer should bear. Even the title *Vanity Fair* has a moral tone: all is empty in life; all struggles by man, and woman, to achieve material success are eventually in vain, for each man ultimately gets what he deserves. We need only to refer to the final paragraph of *Vanity Fair* to recall, as Juliet McMaster says, that:

> Thackeray's more comprehensive vision saw 'Love and Goodness,' at least as manifested in the fallen world, as vanity too; Dobbin's pursuit of what he sees as love and goodness is ultimately as illusory as Becky's struggle for social success.[27]

If such is the moral tone of *Vanity Fair*, the same tone can also be found in *The Golden Lotus*. Like *Vanity Fair*, *The Golden Lotus* serves to expose the decadence in the society of its time. The concern with social and moral decay is reflected by the moral attitude of the author. One example to illustrate this attitude may be found in Volume IV,

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[26] *Vanity Fair*, p.19.
[27] Juliet McMaster, *Thackeray: The Major Novels*. University of Toronto Press, 1971, p.410.

Chapter LXXIX when Hsi-men has his last sexual encounter with Golden Lotus:

> Readers, there is a limit to our energy, but none to our desires. A man who sets no bound to his passion cannot live more than a short time. Hsi-men had given himself to the enjoyment of women and he did not realize that he was like a lantern whose oil is exhausted and whose light is failing. Now his seed was used up, there was nothing in store for him but death.[28]

Although this passage refers to Hsi-men, yet by the narrator's direct address to the reader and his generalisation of terms such as "our" and "a man", it is obvious that the author is using his fictitious character as a representative of that particular segment of society which he is most concerned with. Such strong moral tone can abundantly be detected throughout the novel. Another example is the poem which concludes the novel:

> The record of this house must make us sad.
> Who can deny that Heaven's principle
> Goes on unceasingly?
> Hsi-men was mighty and a lawless man.
> He could not maintain the issue of his house.
> Ching-chi was wild and dissolute
> And met a violent death in consequence.
> Moon Lady and Tower of Jade lived long
> And ended their days in peace.
> Plum Blossom and the Lady of the Vase were wanton
> And soon made their way to Hell.
> It is not strange, therefore,
> That Golden Lotus reaped the reward of evil,
> Leaving a foul reputation to be spoken of
> A thousand years.[29]

This verse displays a tone steeped in the moral of retribution. And just as in *Vanity Fair*, the narrator will not hesitate to intrude into his narrative to philosophize

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[28] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol IV, pp. 85-86.
[29] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.IV, p. 375.

and moralize, or to address the reader directly.

In contrast to *Vanity Fair*, and in spite of its strong moral tone, *The Golden Lotus* is notable for its total lack of "Victorian prudery." Descriptions of physical violence and murders are depicted in all their gory details; sex organs and sexual acts are explicitly graphic, and at times are even described in poetic verses, as when he describes the genitals of Golden Lotus in Volume I, Chapter IV. This indulgence in sex, though no one can deny that sex is just as much a part of life as anything else, has caused the novel to be condemned by early Western scholars as being pornographic. Giles, for example, dismisses it as being a "totally objectionable [book which] would require a translator with the nerve of a Burton."[30] As a result, translations of the novel tend either to delete all the passages which depict sexual acts, or to translate them into Latin. Contemporary critics, like Lai Ming, have fortunately recognized the fact that within the context of the novel, such descriptive passages are indeed an integral part of the whole. Recent studies have also uncovered a certain liberality in Ming's attitude toward sex--an attitude which is quite different in Western societies, especially in the Victorian society of nineteenth-century England.[31] This discovery clearly suggests that the sexually graphic

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[30]Herbert Giles, *A History of Chinese Literature*. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1923, p. 309.

[31]For a detail study of sex and attitude towards sex in Chinese societies, a good source may be found in Robert Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, Netherland: E. J. Brill, 1961.

passages of *The Golden Lotus* would have been accepted by its contemporary readers as a matter of fact. However, as is pointed out by Lai Ming, "such descriptions are often followed...by stern condemnations of adultery and debauchery."[32] In that respect, they serve a specific function: the frequency of sexual activities suggests a preoccupation with sex, and this is seen by Hsiao as a moral degeneration. Hsiao, then, is using his characters' indulgence in sexual activities to reaffirm his belief that "The gate of Love may be the gate of Life, but just as surely is it the gate of Death."[33]

Such explicitness, however, is not possible in the Victorian society of Thackeray who evidently must have anticipated that even his frankness in *Vanity Fair* would shock the "drawing-room" morality of his readers. He also must have realized the burden of authorial truthfulness when in Chapter LXIV he has the narrator remark:

> We must pass over a part of Mrs. Rebecca's biography with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands--the moral world, that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name. There are things we do and know perfectly in Vanity Fair, though we never speak them...and a polite public will no more read an authentic description of vice than a truly refined English or American female will permit the word "breeches" to be pronounced in her chaste hearing. And yet, madam, both are walking the world before our faces every day, without much shocking us. If you were to blush everytime they went by, what complexions you would have! It is only when their naughty names are called out that your modesty has any occasion to show alarm or sense of outrage, and it has been the wish of the

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[32]Lai Ming, p. 57.
[33]*The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.3.

> present writer...to hint at the existence of wickedness...so that nobody's fine feelings may be offended.[34]

This passage, written in a very light tone, not only reveals Thackeray's anticipation, but is also charged with irony and sarcasm. Such passages show that the author cannot resist the opportunity to make fun of the pretensions of Victorian society. More importantly, however, is that they explain why Thackeray had to resort to ambiguities in portraying certain subjects, particularly "tabooed" subjects such as adultery. For example, the guilt of Becky in the Lord Steyne affair has always been the topic of much controversy. Is she or is she not guilty of adultery? Becky herself declares: "I am innocent."[35] But is her declaration reliable, and what are we to believe? Whatever we decide, the fact remains that Thackeray's hands were tied by the Victorian sense of morality and propriety.

Vanity Fair and *The Golden Lotus* are both novels of manners with female characters playing dominant roles; and the manner in which women and society are seen and portrayed in both works indicates to us that Thackeray and Hsiao both utilise their novels as vehicles to depict what they saw as being wrong in their respective societies. While there are obvious differences in the handling of sexuality and other socially "tabooed" subjects such as adultery, it has been seen that there are also several points of similarity between the works, and a more intensive comparative study of

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[34] *Vanity Fair*, p. 617.
[35] *Vanity Fair*, p. 516.

them will serve to reveal some of the differences and similarities between the two cultures.

III. THE SOCIETIES

Vanity Fair is as much a book of snobs as *The Book of Snobs*. Instead of a series of unrelated sketches, Thackeray assembles together in *Vanity Fair* the entire spectrum of English class-snobbery from "The Snob Royal" to the servant-snobs in the like of Sambo, and brings them to life in sets of relationships. When we recollect that the subtitle of *The Book of Snobs* is "The Snobs of England: By One of Themselves", we realize that in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray is an auto-critique: one who writes about and criticizes the society he is part of. This society is comprised mainly of the middle-class or "bourgeoisie."[36] But without focussing exclusively on this particular segment of society, Thackeray accords to its character and life a significant status in *Vanity Fair*. In "Before The Curtain", the Manager of the Performances promises that "There are scenes of all sorts;"[37] so within the world of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray presents a panorama of triumphs and failures, of grandeur and sufferings, of virtue and evils: characters are

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[36]Frederick Engels in *The Condition of The Working Class in England*, Great Britain, Panther Book, 1972, says "the French word 'bourgeoisie'...means the possessing class, specifically that possessing class which is differentiated from the so-called aristocracy - the class which in France and England is directly[,] and in Germany [indirectly,] figuring as 'public opinion', [and is] indirectly in possession of political power." p. 20.

[37]*Vanity Fair*, p. 1.

made to suffer the entire spectrum of human emotions ranging from comedy to tragedy.

Because of the author's anonymity, it has still not been concluded with any certainty the class of Ming society that Hsaio Hsiao-sen belonged to. Within the context of the novel, however, the society in *The Golden Lotus* is basically the Chinese equivalent of the Victorian bourgeoisie. As in *Vanity Fair*, although the concentration is upon this segment of society--the tradesmen and the gentry--it is not exclusively so. And because there are no stringent rules discouraging interactions, socially or otherwise, between master and slave, class-snobbery, though present, is not apparent. So as it is "true that those who live in this world can never wholly free themselves from their bondage to the Seven Feelings and the Six Desires,"[38] the virtues and evils, concerns and struggles, births and deaths of the society of *The Golden Lotus* are presented in a panoramic view.

At the heart of the societies of both novels is the family unit headed by the patriarch who controls the family purse, and whose words are the law within the domestic circle. Obedience to the patriarch is such an important binding factor that once it breaks down, family relationships suffer. In *Vanity Fair*, such a family is exemplified by the Osbornes. For example, when George disregards his father's wish for him to marry Miss Swartz,

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[38]*The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p. 1.

his name is struck off the family Bible, and his family severs all intercourse with him.

> As in other periods of Chinese history, [Ming] society consisted of closely-knit family units,...[in which] the patriarchal family head dominated family councils and controlled family property. His parental responsibility and authority were unquestioned.... He shielded his family or clan from and represented it before the outside world.[3]

Thus, in *The Golden Lotus*, obedience ties the various members of the household to the patriarch, while obeisance holds them to one another. The obedience to the head of the household, as exemplified in Hsi-men, is often charged with an element of fear as the patriarch has considerable power over the fate of the other members: wives may be thrashed, such as when Hsi-men viciously beats his fourth wife, Beauty of the Snow, when she refuses orders to make haste with his breakfast; and slaves may be disposed of as when Hsi-men has Lai Wang exiled while he [Hsi-men] dallies with Wistaria.

Polygamy is practised in *The Golden Lotus* by the rich who can afford it. Hsi-men, around whom the entire society of *The Golden Lotus* revolves, has six wives. Within his household, therefore, there are six mistresses, each with a different rank and function. Moon Lady, being the principal wife, holds a position of some importance, both domestically and socially, as she assumes all the responsibilities of her husband whenever he is away, or upon his death. Each wife also has a little household of her own to look after, as well as a number of slaves who attend to her personal needs.

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[3] *The Traditional Chinese State in Ming Times*, p.24.

The slaves who belong to the general household live in separate quarters, and those who are married often have domestic affairs of their own to manage. Hsi-men's household is thus a microcosm of the society at large, with its own miniature system of hierarchy. It is therefore inevitable that such an arrangement gives rise to frequent domestic disputes as wives and slaves struggle to dominate one another in an attempt to win the favour of Hsi-men.

Polygamy, though an accepted practice in the society of *The Golden Lotus*, is only so when it is practised by a man. While a man may have more than one spouse simultaneously, a woman cannot, though she may remarry if divorced or after the existing husband dies. The same practice is true of sexual promiscuity: it is tolerated, encouraged, and even admired, only when practised by a man. Thus whenever Hsi-men has cause to celebrate or entertain, he goes to a brothel, or if he is entertaining at home, he has courtesans brought there. Such behavior in a woman is not tolerated. Once married, she is expected to observe sexual fidelity to her husband as adultery is punishable by death. Even when her husband dies, and as long as she remains his widow, sexual activities are strictly forbidden. Although polygamy by a man is condoned, and the society of *The Golden Lotus* may often choose to ignore the rampant adulterous affairs, it must not be concluded that Hsaio approves of such social behavior. On the contrary, a strong condemnation always follows a scene of debauchery:

> His wantonness exceeds all bounds, and then come disputes, bloodsheds, and all manner of evil. He is doomed. His wife and children are for ever ruined and his business brought to the dust....The gate of Love may be the gate of Life, but just as surely is it the gate of Death.[40]

In *Vanity Fair*, polygamy is not socially condoned, and is absent. Sexual promiscuity, however, does prevail, and although never explicitly depicted, time and again Thackeray alludes to it by imagery. Society's disapproval, if not condemnation, of such activities is reflected in the behavior of the female characters towards Becky. Thackeray himself has the narrator voice his attitude when the narrator comments that Lord Steyne, "though a nobleman of the greatest station and talents, was a man whose attention would compromise any woman."[41]

Outside the family is Society which, in both novels, is an urban society with occasional extensions into rural communities. Characters in this society are bound together by economic ties, for a man's wealth frequently determines his social position and the milieu into which he is thrust. Professions, commerce, and any other means by which an individual may accumulate wealth, are therefore of crucial importance, because the economic aspect of life reveals the basic structuring principle of the societies of both novels.

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray does not go into any great details about the economic activities of the characters, although he will mention the professions of the men. As a

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[40] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p. 3.
[41] *Vanity Fair*, p. 508.

result, the value of work, highly respected by the industrious and economically powerful bourgeoisie as being a positive value,[42] rarely appears. Although economic realities impinge upon, and play an extremely important role in, the daily life of the society in *Vanity Fair*, professions and occupations are not given much elaboration. While the business concerns of the male characters may be mentioned, the employments of the females are reduced to non-remunerative activities.

In *The Golden Lotus*, however, the economic side of life is thoroughly and consistently integrated into the social life of the characters. Hardly a chapter goes by without commercial activities of some sort taking place: money and financial transactions persistently enter the world of *The Golden Lotus* as not one character in the novel escapes involvement in some kinds of remunerative activities, be they prostitution or law-giving.

In a letter to his mother, Thackeray remarks: "What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world."[43] And indeed, in the world of *Vanity Fair*, God as an omnipotent presence which inspires awe, respect, and love, and which is to be worshipped, does not exist. Religion is scornfully looked upon by Vanity Fair's hypocritical reprobates such as Miss Crawley who "is a godless woman of the world...given up to vanity, licentiousness, profaneness

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[42] Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. Yale University Press, 1957, pp.189-195.
[43] *The Letters and Private Papers of W. M. Thackeray*, Vol.II, p. 309.

and folly,"[4] and whose uncharitable bigotry makes her think that she is doing everyone a favour when "she condescends to trample on them."[5] Representatives of the church too do not escape the contempt of *Vanity Fair*. Mr. Pitt the clergyman is a clerical snob right out of *The Book of Snobs*, and is called "that methodist milksop"[6] by his relatives. He is also "as pompous as an undertaker"[7] and haggles with his father for a place in Parliament.

In *The Golden Lotus*, religions and religious representatives are accorded a treatment similar to that of *Vanity Fair*: nuns and monks swear at one another, and are as corrupt and as conniving as courtesans and tradesmen. The narrator, commenting on the trouble-mongering nuns in the household of Hsi-men, says:

> Monks, nuns and go-betweens should never be allowed to enter palaces and dwellings of the gentry where there are ladies. They pretend to talk of religion and to tell edifying stories, but secretly they do all manner of mischief.[8]

In a society dominated by vanity and ambition, such as the societies of *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus*, the person who holds the purse, handles the bequests, wills inheritances, dispenses dowries and pocket-money, is the god. We have only to consider how her relatives worship and pamper Miss Crawley, who has "a balance at her banker's which would have made her beloved anywhere,"[9] to realize

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[4] *Vanity Fair*, p. 92.
[5] *Thackeray: The Major Novels*, p. 138.
[6] *Vanity Fair*, p. 103.
[7] *Vanity Fair*, p.77.
[8] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.II, p. 186.
[9] *Vanity Fair*, p. 87.

the truth of the statement. In short, he or she who manipulates the coffer has a control over the lives of the others, for the entire society ultimately is dependent on such a person whose decisions on the transfer of wealth can affect an individual's mobility.

In *The Golden Lotus*, the acquisition of money is also one of the main concerns of the characters. Here, as in *Vanity Fair*, hypocrisy is the order of the day -- characters often utter the name of their god, but he is seldom in their hearts. With money, a convict, as we see in Hua Tzu Hsu, can buy his life by bribing the court officials; or a master, like Hsi-men, can send his slave to jail or have him banished from home. For money, men like Han Tao-kuo will pimp for their wives; and women like the old woman Wang will readily kill. Unlike the rigidly structured society of *Vanity Fair*, the world of *The Golden Lotus* reflects an absence of rules and laws by which its citizens may live because its most powerful and influential man, Hsi-men, does not live by any rules, and therefore fails to set an example for those he influences: "Hsi-men was mighty and a lawless man."[50] As a result, we sense a state of chaos in which each character fights to gain material benefits and social advantages, as almost everything seems to hinge on money. And as the possession of money forms the basic structuring principle of both societies, social mobility becomes fundamental.

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[50] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.IV, p.375.

Within the context of the two novels, social mobility can take one of the two routes: individual endeavour or marriage; or sometimes a combination of both. In *Vanity Fair*, the mobilization of a character is frequently ushered by a change in the socio-economic conditions of that individual concerned. Such a change can also often affect the rest of his dependents. Thus the Sedleys feel the disgrace of bankruptcy and suffer social ostracism when old Sedley's business collapses, forcing the family to give up their luxurious home in genteel and highly respected Russell Square for a modest cottage in the vicinity of Fulham Road where they mingle with the servant class. Conversely, through sheer hard work and thrift, Dobbin the grocer becomes a member of Parliament and is respectfully addressed as "Sir William." We have only to consider how in his meaner days his son was scornfully nicknamed "Figs" and his business was jested at to realize how economic conditions are used to determine the social position of a person, and how such conditions constitute the most crucial factor in defining an individual in the society of *Vanity Fair*.

In *The Golden Lotus*, money, besides being able to buy power and influence, allows a person to choose the social milieu he wants to be in. Unlike *Vanity Fair*, however, social status does not play an all-important role, as not much pressure is put upon a character to scale the social ladder. In the society of *The Golden Lotus*, no one is ostracized because he is poor or born of a lower social

stratum. Slaves and courtesans enjoy many of the same things in life as masters and mistresses. As a result, members of the society envy, admire or fear Hsi-men not because he mingles with princes and ministers, but because of the power and influences that his wealth wields.

Among Hsi-men's wives and mistresses, there are titled ladies and courtesans, high-born and well-bred daughters as well as former slaves; in his household, the slaves sleep in the same room as their mistresses and are on very personal terms, calling each other sisters as the wives would call one another among themselves. The distinction between social classes and the significance of one's social status are therefore de-emphasized as characters mingle with one another freely. Class-snobbery, as a result, is diminished. However, because social status is not emphasized, it does not mean that it does not exist in *The Golden Lotus*. At times we do tend to forget its presence until we are jolted into reality when a character chooses to wield the power of his social superiority over another, as in Golden Lotus's squabble with Wistaria over the latter's affair with Hsi-men. Such incidents, however, are rare, and because of a general lack of ability to match one's social duties to one's social status, an atmosphere of lawlessness and disorder prevails.

Because of the rapid social mobility, characters in both novels appear in greatly changed circumstances: richer or poorer, happier or unhappier, exalted or dejected.

Characters move up, down, and around, the social ladder with such astonishing frequency that it is almost impossible to anticipate what their next situations may be like, because present circumstances and future positions may well be worlds apart as slaves become ladies, ladies become prostitutes, singles get married, marrieds get divorced, and so on, with each change placing these characters into entirely different social spheres. Without approving or disapproving, both societies seem to accept this movement as part of the phenomena of life.

What both novels emphasize is the characters' limited capacity for love. Love, as a romantic affection which one feels for another who arouses delight and admiration, or as a platonic devotion which elicits one's tenderness, sympathetic interest, or benevolence for another, is noticeably absent in both societies. In *Vanity Fair*, Amelia searches for romantic love in George, Dobbin looks for it in Amelia, but neither can find it. When George refuses to marry Miss Swartz for her money, old Osborne's obsession with materialism over-rules his paternal love for his son; he scornfully refers to Amelia's attachment to his son as "dam sentimental nonsense and humbug."[51] In the self-centred world of *Vanity Fair*, "love becomes the deluded deification of a false idol."[52] Thus Amelia worships the memory of George for sixteen years, knowing full well that he is not worth her love:

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[51] *Vanity Fair*, p.204.
[52] *Thackeray: The Major Novels*, p.95.

> Her heart tried to persist that George Osborne was worthy and faithful to her, though she knew otherwise....She did not dare to own that the man she loved was her inferior, or to feel that she had given her heart away too soon.[53]

In his idolatry of Amelia, Dobbin too comes to the same realisation:

> "...No, you [Amelia] are not worthy of the love which I [Dobbin] have devoted to you. I knew all along that the prize I had set my life on was not worth the winning; that I was a fool, with fond fancies, too, bartering away my all of truth and ardour against your little feeble remnant of love."[54]

The ultimate revelation of *Vanity Fair* is that, as the narrator remarks, "Everybody is striving for what is not worth the having."[55]

In *The Golden Lotus*, "love...is sexual love."[56] Thus we hear Hsi-men declaring his love whenever he has been sexually-gratified. In all of his sexual escapades, Hsi-men displays very little trace of emotional devotion for his partners, but invariably expresses his satisfaction with their sexuality by something tangible such as money or gifts of food and clothes. Love in *The Golden Lotus*, therefore, is likened to a commodity that is to be traded.

Most marriages in *Vanity Fair* are arranged to promote upward mobility, and to enhance and secure one's social position. In *The Golden Lotus*, they are a basis for economic and social security. In both societies, the woman who

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[53] *Vanity Fair*, p.647.
[54] *Vanity Fair*, p.647.
[55] *Vanity Fair*, p.465.
[56] Olga Lang, *Chinese Family and Society*. Yale University Press, 1968, p.34.

conforms to social expectations, by performing her socially-prescribed duties, is considered by her society as the ideal and virtuous woman; but such a woman is denied the achievement of social mobility and economic security by individual endeavour because she is deemed incapable of, and therefore she does not engage in, business activities. This injustice deprives women, many of whom are demonstrably as intelligent and as resourceful as the men, of the opportunity to be independent. They are therefore forced by necessity to be economically and socially dependent on their men. The task of finding a financially secure husband is thus of prime importance. Consequently, marriages are often economic arrangements which often result in the misalliance of individuals. In *Vanity Fair*, the Becky-Rawdon marriage is an example of such a misalliance with disastrous consequences; that of Vase and Chang Chu-shan in *The Golden Lotus* is another.

The mismatching of individuals in marriages is a common means by which Thackeray and Hsiao criticize their respective societies. Two types of mismatches are usually emphasized: those based upon economic disparity as witnessed by the marriages of Becky and Vase, and the others upon cultural differences as seen in the marriages between Amelia and George in *Vanity Fair*, and between Orchid and Chen Ching-chi in *The Golden Lotus*. As a result of such misalliances, unhappy wives abound in both societies.

Whether it is in marriage or in matters of economy, women in the societies of both *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus* are denied the opportunity to engage in commerce or politics. In a society dominated by men, they are reduced to busying themselves with leisure activities, such as dances, dinner parties, riding in the park, and by promoting romances, or supervising the household. The chief concern of those who are married is to keep their mates happy, while the main occupation of the unmarried ones is to prepare themselves for any prospective husband. Thus as soon as they leave school, "Miss Sharp and Miss Sedley prepare to open the campaign"[8] against the world, assumably the male and marriageable world, while Miss Swartz labours diligently at her piano singing the few songs that she has learnt, and hoping to impress some eligible bachelors with her accomplishments. Fortunately for them, these ladies are equipped with the commodities available to them for trade: charm and youthful beauty, and in the case of Miss Swartz, the added attraction of eight-thousand pounds a year. But for women such as Glorvina and Miss Osborne, they are ready, in sheer desperation, to catch any man who may come their way.

In *The Golden Lotus*, marriage as a means of climbing the social ladder is de-emphasized. This is not to say that it does not exist, or that Hsiao is less concerned with marriage as a social and moral institution. But given the

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[8] *Vanity Fair*, p. 18.

values of the society depicted in the novel, to be married is not necessarily better than not to be. Marriage, to the women of *The Golden Lotus*, is the basis for economic and social security. But so long as a woman is able to make a living out of prostitution, pimping, match-making, or even being a nun, then why bother with marriage at all if it means giving up her freedom to do as she pleases? As for protection, a woman has only to know the "right" people. Once married, she becomes the property of her husband, to be kept or disposed of as he fancies, and social activities become even more restricted.

In both novels, society adopts differing attitudes towards women who are married and those who are not. In *The Golden Lotus*, the sexual promiscuity of an unmarried woman, though frowned upon, is not forbidden. With a married woman, the case is the opposite. A wife is expected to observe fidelity to her husband, for adultery by a married woman is punishable by death. In *Vanity Fair*, though marital status does not alter in any way society's condemnation of adultery and sexual promiscuity, it does allow Becky, as a married woman, to entertain men openly in her salon. In either case, whether married or otherwise, women in both societies become the bearers and transmitters of traditional social values and moral codes: they are expected to embody and exemplify the "ideals" that their societies have prescribed for them, and to transmit these values to the next generation.

Besides women, children too are subject to the whims of the societies of *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus*. In *Vanity Fair*, children play a significant role as they mirror the grotesque nature of the adults. Georgy and Rawdy are two good examples: both are used as objects upon which the adults display their natural inclinations - excessive maternal love from Amelia, and the total lack of it in the case of Becky. These children also become the receiving-ends in the social-values-transmission process. Thus depending on the system of transmission in which he is caught, a child may become class conscious and snobbish, as in the case of Georgy who is brought up by his grandfather to be a "gentleman," or he may become a gentleman like Rawdy who as a boy is left to himself to tumble and fall on his own.

Ultimately, one's birth and origin become important factors in climbing the social ladder of Vanity Fair. Thus Becky allies herself to the Montmorencys and never alludes to her actress-mother. For the same reason, old Osborne constantly stresses the gentle upbringing of his son George, for he himself is "a gentleman, and keeps his carriage."[58]

In *The Golden Lotus*, because class-distinctions are not emphasized, an individual's birth and origin, no matter how low or high they may be, are never taken into consideration: a slave girl who is forced into prostitution may some day become a lady; or a titled lady such as Lady Lin may engage in an adulterous affair and condescend to become somebody's

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[58] *Vanity Fair*, p. 45.

mistress. And because birth and origin are not crucial in defining a character's status, children consequently do not play as significant a role in *The Golden Lotus* as they do in *Vanity Fair*. Nevertheless, when a child does enter the world of *The Golden Lotus*, it usually enters as a male in order to enhance the domestic position of his mother, as in the case of Kuan Ko and Vase. In a male-oriented society such as that of *The Golden Lotus*, a male child is more valued than a female one because he is expected to continue the family line. And in the case of the birth of Kuan Ko, it is even more significant because of the lack, hitherto, of a male heir in Hsi-men's family.

The world, as seen by Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*, is hypocritical and self-centred. Seen by Hsiao in *The Golden Lotus*, it is decadent. Included in it are not only representatives of each social class, but also a host of other dependent institutions such as the public-school system, the army, religion, the civil service and the government. All these are concentrated in one bustling urban area, with occasional extensions into rural communities, and in the case of *Vanity Fair*, into Europe and India. Although the view is panoramic, the focus is on an incomplete society. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray ignores the world of business, profession, and labour. The making and losing of characters' fortunes are left to chance and to Thackeray's manipulations in order to fit the plot. Thus, when a character, such as old Sedley, loses his entire fortune, we

are not told how or why he loses it. Besides, both authors omit the more positive aspects of the bourgeoisie, exemplified in the Victorian era by their advocacy for social reforms and their support for bettering the working conditions of the working-class;[1] and in Ming China by the fact that they "were by no means completely oppressive...and regularly contributed to schools, roads, bridges, temples, irrigation works, entertainments, charitable institutions, and other benefits to their communities."[2]

Although both societies support certain values of traditional institutions like marriage, family, and home, such as may be witnessed in the homes of the Sedleys and the Chous, and friendships, such as the one Dobbin has for George and Plum Blossom has for Golden Lotus, none of these institutions escape the bitter criticism of both novelists. Even the army, a traditional establishment for the cultivation of heroic and noble characters, is rendered ineffectual: war heroes such as Colonel O'Dowd and Major Chou vanquish armies on the battle fields, but become ineffectual husbands dominated by their wives. Society, in general, is depicted by both authors to embody the evils of self-interest, materialism, hypocrisy and sex. Characters are seen as being obsessed with self-centredness, and consequently become incapable of intelligent will; they are swept and carried along by social events, with the

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[1] Richard Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1973, pp.73-113.
[2] *The Traditional Chinese State in Ming Times*, p.34.

unprincipled winning and the weak rendered ludicrously helpless. In both societies, characters are also unable to realize that in their world of self-interest, they cannot live by being scrupulous. By failing to speak up against social injustice and abuse, they are made to appear contented with the way society is, and with what they have, until the arrival of the siren.

IV. BECKY SHARP

An important aspect of Becky is her role as the focal point on which many of the social values of Vanity Fair are projected and made significant. Most studies of Becky are inclined to concentrate their efforts on the analysis of Becky as a psychologically convincing character in Thackeray's canvas of humanity, with lesser efforts being made to discuss her role as being complementary to that of the narrator. This is not to say that such psychological studies of Becky are of little importance; on the contrary, in order to better understand Becky, a psychological analysis of her is fundamental. However, what is also of importance in *Vanity Fair* is the understanding that Becky embodies, and thus becomes the focal point for, many of the negative values of her society. As the various characters are pitted against her, she serves to mirror and expose their hypocrisy and self-centredness, thereby revealing many aspects of her society upon which the narrator may not directly comment. As such, a relevant relationship can be traced between her and the narrator. This relationship is a significant one because both play roles which are complementary to one another: the narrator as the commentator, Becky as the actor of his comments.

As we have already discussed the role of the narrator previously, we will concentrate this chapter on the role and functions of Becky in *Vanity Fair*. In order to arrive at a pertinent definition of her role, we shall first analyze Becky by examining the spectrum of images with which she is associated. This will provide us with a link to discuss Becky's relationship with the narrator, with her society, and to compare her with some of the other characters.

Our conception of Becky is to a great extent influenced by the epithet "siren" and the description that the narrator offers of her:

> In describing this siren, singing and smiling coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all around, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses;...They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking glass; but when they sink into their native elements, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims.''

This description, however, appears in the novel as late as Chapter LXIV. Before this, we are able to formulate from the previous chapters an impression of Becky by the stereotypes of appearance and manner which she manifests. At the onset of the novel, we are told that she has already been known as a seductress when her secret liaison with the Reverend Mr. Crisp was uncovered. Later, she is said to be an

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''*Vanity Fair*, p.617.

accomplished musician, with green eyes and white shoulders seductively bared--attributes that may be associated with the siren. To further emphasize the threatening, villainous connotations of the siren, the narrator remarks that she is "never known to have done a good action in behalf of anybody," and is a person who "nobody cried for leaving her."[12] From the moment she flings the dictionary out of the carriage window, the narrator focuses on Becky's humour in a manner which gives it a strong negative implication.

Much of the imagery that surrounds Becky further reinforces our conception of her as evil. The spectrum of animal images that are associated with her, ranging from predatory birds such as the eagle to poisonous snakes such as the viper, all have a certain demonic quality about them which becomes quite apparent in Becky as well. In the pursuit of her ambitions, Becky, as her action shows, is likened to such animals stalking their prey. Her campaigns against her potential victims, such as Jos Sedley, are well designed and carried out with intelligence and unflinching determination.

Becky is also "uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire."[13] Her liveliness and flexibility enable her to adapt herself to any situation that she may find herself in. While the other characters in the novel are never accorded the privilege, we are occasionally given a rare glimpse of what Becky really is:

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[12] *Vanity Fair*, pp. 14-19.
[13] *Vanity Fair*, p. 6.

> Whether friends were present or absent she [Becky] had always a kind smile...he [Rawdon] did not see the face [Becky's] opposite him, haggard, weary, and terrible; it lighted up with fresh candid smiles when he woke. It kissed him gaily.'[4]

The ability to put on a facade and to adapt herself to different situations is what makes Becky "uncommonly flexible." Thus, when serving in Sir Pitt's household, it becomes "naturally Rebecca's duty to make herself, as she said, agreeable to her benefactors, and to gain their confidence to the utmost of her power."[5] Later on, we witness this humility develop into an attitude of haughtiness that enables her to fend herself against the ladies of Gaunt House who unanimously consider her "the common enemy."[6] Becky also captivates Rawdon because she is able to anticipate, and therefore acts according to her anticipation, the kind of woman who attracts him. She does the same thing with George so as to make him think that she is "gay, brisk, arch, *distinguée*, delightful."[7] With George, we see Becky deliberately emphasizing all those qualities which Amelia lacks. She does this in order to present herself as different from Amelia as night is different from day, so as to "conquer" him. Becky is therefore able to utilise her flexibility and liveliness to work positively for her, so that even when she is finally defeated and ostracized from the society of respectable

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[4] *Vanity Fair*, p.509.
[5] *Vanity Fair*, p. 88.
[6] *Vanity Fair*, p. 471.
[7] *Vanity Fair*, p. 233.

folks in England, this "little wanderer went about, setting up her tent in various cities of Europe, as restless as Ulysses or Bamfylde Moore Carew."[16]

The use of Greek mythological figures, such as Ulysses, to create an image of Becky is quite appropriate, but such images can significantly contribute to our understanding of Becky only if we know the stories to which these images allude. In Greek mythology, Ulysses is portrayed as a wise warrior who, having offended the gods, is sentenced to ten years of wandering before arriving home from Troy. Even Tennyson sees him as a restless adventurer when he writes:

> I [Ulysses] cannot rest from travel; I will drink
> Life to the lees....
> How dull it is to make a pause, to make an end,
> To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use![17]

In her struggles, Becky too is like a warrior battling for her place in Vanity Fair. For her, life is a constant stream of sieges and competitions; and like Ulysses, she has offended the "gods" of her society and is thus condemned to wander. Although the modern reader may view the bohemian nature of Becky as being neither positive nor negative, yet her inclination to "wander" is an undesirable quality which renders her an "outsider" in a society which considers the proper place for a woman to be is in her home.[18] It also makes it difficult for us to believe her when she contemplates being a good woman if she has five-thousand

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[16] *Vanity Fair*, p.625.
[17] Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses" in *Selected Poetry*. U.S.A.: Herbert Marshall McLuhan, 1966, lines 6-7; 22-23.
[18] *Victorian People and Ideas*, pp.50-59.

pounds a year. One of the reasons for our reluctance to be convinced by her is the fact that she has been successfully shown to be unreliable. Another reason is that we know that it is not in Becky's nature "...to pause, to make an end./To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use." Even at the height of her social success in London, Becky becomes easily bored by all the unpaid luxuries around her, causing the narrator to remark:

> I doubt if Rebecca, whom we have seen piously praying for Consols, would have exchanged her poverty and the dare-devil excitement and chances of her life, for Osborne's money and the humdrum gloom which enveloped him.'[11]

Of more significance is that Becky's contemplation reveals to us her society's accepted standard of virtue implicit in material wealth.

Another Greek mythological figure that is associated with Becky is Clytemnestra. In the chapter "In Which A Charade Is Acted", Becky plays the part of Clytemnestra killing Agamemnon to such perfection that she has the entire audience gasping in awe and admiration. This Clytemnestra image is carried further in an illustration depicting Becky eavesdropping on Jos from behind a curtain.'[12] In the illustration,'[13] she is shown with a sinister sneer on her

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'[11] *Vanity Fair*, p.412.
'[12] *Vanity Fair*, p.663.
'[13] In the study of Thackeray's works, it is vital to consider also his illustrations because "his illustrations have the transcending merit of coming directly from the mind that created the work being illustrated. Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*... [derives her] vitality as character from Thackeray's pictures as well as from his text." Gordon N. Ray, *The Illustrator and the Book in England from 1790 to 1914*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, p.74.

face, and in one hand she holds a small bottle, perhaps, of poison. The implication here is that she is prepared to kill Jos for his insurance money, and this implication becomes clearer when we take into account the predatory animal images with which Becky has been associated. Besides, we know Clytemnestra does kill Agamemnon in Aeschylus' trilogy of "The Oresteia." In this connection, it may be helpful to note that in Greek classical theatres, murders are never actually staged in front of an audience; such acts occur backstage, and the corpses may then be carried onstage. In reassessing the guilt of Becky in Jos' premature death, it may be useful, then, to bear in mind that with the depiction of Jos' death, Thackeray might possibly have been following the traditions and techniques of the Greek classical theatres, especially when the image evoked in this particular case is that of a famous adulteress and murderess of Greek classical literature.

The argument that Becky is capable of killing, if it is profitable for her to do so, may be reinforced by the large spectrum of carnivorous animal images such as the snake and the vixen. However, such images are not restricted to depicting Becky alone. For example, one of the supporters of the Crawley arms is a serpent,[74] and on the eve of the battle at Waterloo, George hides a note in Becky's bouquet, "coiled like a snake among the flowers."[75] The image of the snake and its association with poison is thus especially

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[74] *Vanity Fair*, p.75.
[75] *Vanity Fair*, p.278.

prevalent in *Vanity Fair*. Lord Steyne, for instance, is a savage-looking man who threatens to poison old Miss Briggs because she interrupts "his tete-a-tete with the fair Colonel's wife [Becky]."[76] Later, he also threatens to assassinate Becky by poisoning her.[77] When Amelia discovers her mother administering some soothing syrup to her child, she shrieks: "I will not have baby poisoned, mamma."[78] No less vehement is Mrs. Sedley's retort: "...I've nursed five children, and buried three: and the one I loved best of all...says I'm a murderess. Ah, Mrs. Osborne, may *you* never nourish a viper in your bosom, that's my prayer."[79] This snake-and-poison image endows almost everyone in Vanity Fair, including even the gentle Amelia, with the same destructive capability as Becky. Considered in such a carnivorous environment, we realise then that Becky is basically not any more venomous or destructive than any of the other members of her society. It is in such a setting that Becky can demonstrate her intellectual superiority effectively. We also see that although her destructive capability has to be emphasized and made more significant, its effectiveness extends only to those whose natures are similar to hers, for example George and Lord Steyne, and even Amelia. Characters such as Dobbin, who is neither a self-centred person nor a trifler, are immune to Becky's seduction. As such, Becky becomes the concentration centre

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[76] *Vanity Fair*, p.466.
[77] *Vanity Fair*, p.628.
[78] *Vanity Fair*, p.375.
[79] *Vanity Fair*, p.376.

upon which the negative aspects of her society may be accentuated.

Although we cannot deny the basic sirennic nature of Becky, it is necessary for us to understand that her childhood as a motherless girl has in many ways moulded her into the way she is. As the narrator informs us: "She had the dismal precocity of poverty," and she "had never been a girl, she said; she had been a woman since she was eight years old."[10] Her environment and upbringing have taught her to be unscrupulous and tough in order to survive. Surrounded by social predators such as Miss Barbara Pinkerton, Miss Crawley, and Lord Steyne, who will not hesitate to exploit her to their own advantages, Becky has learned that if she is to live among them, she will have to fight and be a predator herself. In many ways, then, she is a product and victim of her society and her environment.

In her struggle to realize her ambitions, Becky becomes disruptive to the relatively complacent social atmosphere around her. Her tactics are incompatible with her society's expectations of feminine virtues, and her moral attitudes are unacceptable. To illustrate this, we will compare her with Amelia to better understand why, according to Vanity Fair, Becky is the siren and Amelia the angel.

Although both Becky and Amelia, much like the other members of their society, are basically self-centred creatures, the means by which these two women connive are

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[10] *Vanity Fair*, p.21.

explicitly different. While Amelia is passive, Becky is actively involved in the actualization of her schemes of ambition. And because Becky is a non-conformist, she becomes a dissenter who antagonizes the otherwise generally peaceful world of Vanity Fair. The Victorian idea of a good woman is one who is subservient to her husband: "a priestess dedicated to preserving the home."[81] In defining the roles of the sexes, Tennyson writes:

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
> Man for the sword and for the needle she:
> Man with the head and woman with the heart:
> Man to command and woman to obey:
> All else confusion.[82]

From such a definition, we see that Amelia is the conformist, while Becky is not. So, if Amelia the "little white-robed angel" is to be the principle of good in Vanity Fair, then Becky must be considered the embodiment of evil. And as angel and siren, their attitudes and general outlooks on life are worlds apart.

We have mentioned earlier that one of the means by which an individual may scale the social ladder of Vanity Fair is by marriage. Unfortunately, marriages based upon any ground other than the compatibility of the couple's spirits invariably result in the misalliances of individuals, followed soon by disastrous consequences. Becky's marriage with Rawdon is one such misalliance, and so is the one between Amelia and George.

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[81]Altick, p.53.
[82]Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess*. London: Strahan and Company, Publishers, 1869, p.130.

Generally, a man who realizes that his marriage is only a partnership of convenience for economic arrangements or the fulfulment of social expectations, demands only decorum and propriety on the part of the wife. But a man who, for whatever reasons, has a trust in his wife's fidelity is to some extent shattered by the faithlessness of his wife. Such a husband would also experience some degree of jealousy, shame, and anger by the knowledge, or even suspicion, of adultery. Rawdon is such a man, because he has married for love. Thus, when warned by his brother of the "improper exhibitions"[83] of Becky, Rawdon changes to

> ...become a very watchful and exemplary domestic character. He left off his clubs and billiards. He never left home. He took Becky out to drives: he went laborously with her to all her parties. Whenever my Lord Steyne called, he was sure to find the Colonel.[84]

Thackeray himself has the narrator say that Rawdon's marriage "was one of the honestest actions which we shall have to record in any portion of that gentleman's biography."[85] Rawdon's "honestest action" is,, however, unrewarded because Becky's attitude towards their marriage is quite different: she marries him with the hope and expectation of inheriting his aunt's money. Apart from the prospect of his aunt's money, Rawdon really has nothing but his love to offer Becky. But love is not what Becky wants. As a result, Becky has little respect for her husband. In the beginning, she attempts to hide her contempt for him:

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[83] *Vanity Fair*, p.509.
[84] *Vanity Fair*, p.509.
[85] *Vanity Fair*, p.151.

> "If he had but a little more brains," she thought to herself, "I might make something of him;" but she never let him perceive the opinion she had of him.[1]

In spite of this, Rawdon's faith in Becky is still intact: "He believes in his wife as much as the French soldiers in Napoleon."[2] The unfortunate awakening for Rawdon comes when his aunt dies and leaves him almost nothing, thereby shattering Becky's expectation of becoming rich. Becky at once abandons all hopes in Rawdon and undauntedly decides to play her own field. In the Becky-Rawdon marriage, we see a reversal in the traditional roles of the dominant husband and the submissive wife: Becky is the dominant partner in her marriage as she successfully controls the household finances and operation; and Rawdon becomes a warrior rendered ineffectual as a man by Becky, as the entire institution of the army is rendered ineffectual by the narrator. More significantly, we see the vanity of love as a benevolent emotion between a man and a woman. In *Vanity Fair*, such virtues, as exhibited by Rawdon and Dobbin, are rarely rewarded.

However, in spite of her contempt for her husband, Becky is forced to put up a facade and to live with him, because a divorce initiated by the wife, even one as antagonistic to her society as Becky is, would have been unheard of. Besides, her marital status enables Becky to entertain publicly without losing her social respectability.

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[1] *Vanity Fair*, p.164.
[2] *Vanity Fair*, p.337.

It also renders her more desirable to men such as Lord Steyne. In her relationship with Lord Steyne, we see Becky once again reinforcing her role as the focal point in *Vanity Fair*: she is constantly the butt and cause for Lord Steyne's display of his male arrogance, dominance, and viciousness.

Though we cannot say that Amelia's marriage to George is based upon the acquisition of money, we nevertheless can see that they are two totally incompatible characters. While George is the typical dandy of Vanity Fair, Amelia is a morbid creature whose

> ...very joy...was a sort of grief, or so tender, at least, that its expression was tears. Her sensibilities were so weak and tremulous, that perhaps they ought not to be talked about in a book.''

Unlike Becky who in her strange ways is able to keep Rawdon happy, Amelia bores George so that they are "only a week married, and here was George already suffering ennui, and eager for other's society."''

Perhaps, the deterioration of her marriage is not entirely Amelia's fault: unlike Becky, she does not possess the zest to struggle, but bears everything meekly as her nature is to yield. Besides, she has married for love. In fact, she is so wrapped up in her love for George that to her George is the world, and nothing else exists. She even thinks of the war in terms of George and his participation in it. In Amelia, then, we see the significance of a historical event de-emphasized and made meaningless in the

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''*Vanity Fair*, p.377.
''*Vanity Fair*, p. 233.

same manner that the narrator and Becky render war heroes ineffectual. In her obsession, not unlike the rest of her society, Amelia is blinded to the world outside her object of idolatry, and we see the incongruity between her illusion and reality.

Unfortunately, Amelia's love turns into idolatory, and after George dies, it becomes an obsession so intense that it blinds her to everything else. As a result, she refuses to admit to herself that George is not the "fairy prince" that she insists on imagining him to be:

> Her heart tried to persist in asserting that George Osborne was worthy and faithful to her, though she knew otherwise....She did not dare to own that the man she loved was her inferior; or to feel that she had given her heart away too soon. Given once, the pure bashful maiden was too modest, too tender, too trustful, too weak, too much woman to recal it. ••

This is the narrator's way of saying that Amelia, the angel, like the rest of the characters in *Vanity Fair*, is blinded by her pride and by her pursuit of vanity. In short, her selfishness, disguised as love, is as persistent as Becky's, and it would have wounded too much of her vanity for her to admit to having worshipped a "sham." What is also significant about Amelia is that her excessive love emphasizes the total lack of love in Becky.

The usual epithets used to describe Amelia are "tender" and "gentle." Ironically, the tenderness of Amelia is cold as ice: there is nothing tender nor gentle about her relationship with Dobbin. Her notion of him is vulgar: she

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••*Vanity Fair*, p. 169.

thinks meanly of him because he lisps, is not quite as debonair and fine-looking as George, but is exceedingly awkward and ungainly.

While Amelia realizes that marriage with Dobbin is a means by which she can mobilize herself, she is so busy luxuriating in her griefs and basking in the glories of widowhood that she chooses to ignore that possibility. Her letters to Dobbin are, therefore, appropriately cold and distant. The problem with Amelia in her relationship with Dobbin is that "She didn't wish to marry him, but she wished to keep him. She wished to give him nothing, but that he should give her all."'' In simpler terms, by constantly dangling Dobbin on a tenterhook, Amelia is perceived as being as artful and as selfish as Becky. The difference between the two is that, while Becky employs action, Amelia uses her passive charms to lure her victims.

Though Amelia may be passive, she is not to any degree less intelligent than Becky is, and the stance she adopts supports this assumption. The virtuous qualities that she manifests are, however, of no positive help to her in the predicaments that she finds herself in after her father's bankruptcy. Nevertheless, because they are socially desirable qualities, she is eventually able to win the hearts of her society, for hers is the way her society prescribes that a woman should behave and conduct herself. As a result, Amelia is admired, when she is in sound

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''*Vanity Fair*, p. 647.

financial standing, while Becky is condemned. Nonetheless, we can detect that Amelia is as much of a siren as Becky is: she feeds her sentimentality with the corpse of George for sixteen years while twanging her harp at Dobbin and bidding him to come hold her looking glass.

Becky, on the other hand, possesses none of the socially approved sentiments of Amelia. However, nobody in Vanity Fair understands the power that sentiments can wield better than Becky. We see her over and over again achieving her financial gains by exploiting the sentiments of others: she wheedles money out of Mr. Sedley and Lord Steyne by taking advantage of the former's sympathy for her as a friendless orphan, and of the latter's egotism. And because she is able to see how affections can help her advance in her social-climbing, she makes a big display of what does not come to her naturally. For example, we know she does not care for her son, yet she kisses him in public, and would sit

> ...hemming a shirt for her dear little boy. Whenever Mrs. Rawdon wished to be particularly humble and virtuous, this little shirt used to come out of her work-box. It had got to be too small for Rawdon long before it was finished though.'[2]

Not only is Becky aware of the desirable qualities that are socially acceptable, she also knows how to take advantage of social pretensions, and therefore does not refrain from playing the virtuous woman with her pitiable gestures, humble poses, and tears. No less of a woman than

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[2]*Vanity Fair*, p.428.

Amelia, her role-playing serves to expose the pretensions of the female sex, and reveals to us the extent to which womanly manners of Vanity Fair may be masqueraded. In Becky, we see an endless flow of implications that outward manifestations are no more than a facade to mask inner self-centredness. Thus in *Vanity Fair*, on the one hand we see Becky as an attack on the artificial femininity of the women in her society, and on the other we see that Becky's hypocrisy is ironically the consequence of what has been cultivated and nurtured by the guardians of morality in Vanity Fair.

Implications, doubts and ambiguities are used constantly in *Vanity Fair* to prevent our true understanding of Becky, and they provoke us into unceasing questioning. But they also provide us with a clue to the role that she plays. In considering *Vanity Fair*, we must not be led into thinking that the ambiguities are created for their own sake. Apart from the fact that Thackeray is forced by contemporary social convention and values to resort to ambiguities in portraying taboo subjects, each of the ambiguities also serves a functional purpose. Moreover, the fact that ambiguities surround only Becky, and none of the other actively involved characters, should be sufficiently indicative of the particular role that she plays. One example is the ambiguity of Becky's birth and origin.

According to its conventions, Vanity Fair regards Becky with suspicion because of the doubts and mystery surrounding

her birth. In a society which places a great deal of emphasis on birth and origin to determine one's social status, Becky's dubious heritage, especially on her mother's side, becomes a disservice to her. And without the all-important mother to take charge of her matrimonial arrangements, Becky cannot afford to resign herself like Amelia can, but has to think and scheme all by herself. As a result, the Sedleys' servants do not like her because they feel she is competing with them. From incidents of a similar nature, we see Becky being judged and condemned by her society; but we also realize that situations in which a member of society is being criticized and condemned for the wrong reasons are constantly repeated. While we do appreciate and can justify her society's criticisms, such as those of the Sedleys' servants, and while we have to admit that Becky deserves much criticism, we also feel that she should be judged on grounds other than those exemplified by the Sedleys' servants. In *Vanity Fair*, then, Becky's uncertain parentage serves, among other purposes, to expose the selfish motives for material gains in her society.

Another ambiguous aspect of Becky which serves a similar function is whether or not Becky, in her relentless pursuit of fortune and success, is willing to compromise her feminine virtues. In the famous "Discovery Scene" in which Rawdon bursts upon his wife and finds her in a compromising situation with Lord Steyne, Becky declares "I am

innocent."'[3] But how innocent can she be, especially when a note for a thousand pounds from the lord in question is found in her possession? Here again the narrator fails to provide us with any clue. While evidence is indicative of her guilt, we still have to accord Becky the benefit of the doubt. At the same time, we cannot help realising the truth of her declaration; in many ways, she is innocent. The only thing of which she is guilty is being a woman in a society which has a double standard in the judgement of the sexes. Becky has merely carried the values of her society to the extreme, and if she is guilty for embodying such social values, then is the entire society not guilty as well?

When we reconsider the scene, we see that Rawdon is as guilty as his wife, for his values too are expressed in monetary terms: "You might have spared me £100, Becky, out of all this - I have always shared with you."'[4] His condemnation of Becky is thus not of her affair with Lord Steyne, but of her selfishness in not sharing what she has with him. Here, we see that the ambiguity of Becky's guilt is used also to expose the cowardice and hypocrisy of her money-conscious society. Even among immediate family members, money is the critical factor in determining relationships.

The same function is served by the Clytemnestra image in the illustration which we saw earlier in the chapter.

'[3] *Vanity Fair*, p.515.
'[4] *Vanity Fair*, p.316.

This image carries an implication that Becky is prepared to kill Jos for the insurance money, but whether she is in fact guilty of Jos' premature death is an ambiguity not unlike the ambiguity of her guilt in the affair with Lord Steyne. Such ambiguities are intended, and are certainly effective because they provoke us into wanting to discover more about Becky. More importantly, we see Becky being used as a scapegoat to demonstrate what power money can wield and what evil self-interest can cause in the society of Vanity Fair.

We note then that ambiguities provide a clue to, and reinforce, the role that Becky plays in *Vanity Fair*. Of vital importance is the ambiguity of her origin. The dubious origin of Becky makes it impossible for us to determine conclusively the social class to which she belongs. This, and her flexibility, allows her to be mobilized up and down the social ladder of Vanity Fair with considerable ease and rapidity. Thus we see her completely at home with servants, ladies, and aristocrats; whether as a governess or a lady, she is able to adjust herself according to her station. In this respect, her mobility and flexibility resemble the omniscience of the narrator who, we have seen, is also free to mingle with the crowd.

However, as the narrator is not directly involved in the action of the plot, but merely mingles, observes, and relates the story, he does not act out any of the interests of the society he comments on. Becky does. As a focal point, she embodies and brings to being the social values and mores

of Vanity Fair by acting out the various aspects of the social-types of her society. So, while the narrator exposes snobbery, Becky exemplifies and uses it to advance herself. As a result, her role becomes complementary to that of the narrator.

Further evidence of the sympathy between Becky and the narrator can be detected from the tone of the latter towards Becky. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator's attitude towards Becky is somewhat distant and neutral, but as the story advances, his tone becomes progressively sympathetic and fond. His references to Becky as "the little wanderer"[15] and "our Becky"[16] betray as much endearment as the contempt concealed in his satirical tone when he calls Amelia a "tender little parasite."[17] Besides, of all the characters in the novel, only Becky knows as well as the narrator the worthlessness of her pursuit: "Everybody is striving for what is not worth the having."[18]

However, Becky's sirennic nature must not be de-emphasized. She herself declares: "Revenge may be wicked, but it's natural....I am no angel."[19] Of course she is not an angel, but then, in truth, neither is any of the other characters in the social milieu in which she moves. If Becky is not known to have done a good deed for anybody, she is certainly not alone. As for revenge, she voices the

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[15] *Vanity Fair*, p.442.
[16] *Vanity Fair*, p.460.
[17] *Vanity Fair*, p.661.
[18] *Vanity Fair*, p.465.
[19] *Vanity Fair*, p.19.

sentiment of her society when she claims that it is natural. Her career, therefore, is a reflection of Vanity Fair's chief concerns: self-interest and self-advancement. She would not hesitate to trample on the weak to get to the strong in order to achieve her ambitions. In declaring that she is not an angel, we see that she is, unlike the rest of her society, at least true to herself.

Her honesty to herself coupled with her profound understanding of her society, and her grasp of what she wants out of it, give Becky an ability to manoeuvre herself with great dexterity. Where defeat devastates Amelia, it gives Becky the strength to move along to her next siege. Whereas Amelia, like the conforming angel she is supposed to be, is obsessed with her blind, vain love for her husband and her son, Becky gives thoughts to neither of hers. To Becky, life in Vanity Fair consists of a series of competitions, and she aims at anything in her society that will ensure her success, money and power. Ultimately, she only succeeds in becoming a scourge to her society, and we realize that she is effective only because her society is as selfish as she is. She would not have been able to function effectively if her social milieu consisted of characters such as Dobbin who is immune to her because he is neither a trifler, a hypocrite, nor a snob.

Apart from her honest grasp of what she wants out of her society, Becky is also intelligent and has a profound insight: to use an old cliche, she sees through people. Even

Lord Steyne concedes that she is "an accomplished little devil,"[100] and Becky herself claims: "'I have brains...and almost all the rest of the world are fools.'"[101] Her insight enables her to gauge and deal with people such as George and Dobbin. A good example occurs in the episode in which George is patronizing Dobbin:

> "There's not a finer fellow in the service," Osborne said, "nor a better officer, though he is not an Adonis, certainly." And he looked towards the glass himself with much *naivete*, and in so doing, caught Miss Sharp's eye fixed keenly upon him, at which he blushed a little, and Rebecca thought in her heart, '*Ah, mon beau Monsieur!* I think I have *your* gage'--the little artful minx!'[102]

Armed with this awareness of George's weaknesses, Becky proceeds to successfully seduce him.

Dobbin, on the other hand, is not as easily won over because he is "so honest, that her arts and cajoleries did not affect him, and he shrank from her with instinctive repulsion."[103] Yet Becky gauges him accurately too. While Amelia has "rather a mean opinion of her husband's friend, Captain Dobbin...[because] he lisped--he was very plain and homely-looking: and exceedingly awkward and ungainly,"[104] Becky is able to recognize the moral strength and goodness of Dobbin:

> "What a noble heart that man has...if I could have had a husband as that--a man with a heart and brains too! I would not have minded his large feet."[105]

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[100] *Vanity Fair*, p.506
[101] *Vanity Fair*, p.410.
[102] *Vanity Fair*, p.52.
[103] *Vanity Fair*, p.231.
[104] *vanity Fair*, p.230.
[105] *Vanity Fair*, p.648.

Thus, Becky is conscious of what is in the world around her. Unlike Amelia, she is not blind to the fact that she is also surrounded on all sides by social predators and by ominous images which pose both as a threat and a challenge to her intelligence and insight. An example of such an image is the marriage of Sir Pitt.

The second Lady Pitt is the daughter of a poor ironmonger who has been deliberately picked by Sir Pitt to be his second wife because he thinks that she will at least appreciate the social elevation as the result of such a marriage. However, after extracting her from her social milieu and mobilizing her into his, Sir Pitt shamefully neglects her, and as her "hold on Sir Pitt's affection was not very great,"[10] she is left to her own to wither and eventually die. When we consider Amelia in relation to the plight of Lady Pitt, we realize that Amelia would surely suffer a similar fate had it not been for the timely death of George. The question then arises as to whether Becky would have been subject to the same predicament had she been free to accept Sir Pitt's hand when he proposed to her. Surely Becky is much too resourceful and vindictive to tolerate Sir Pitt's neglect of her if she had been Lady Pitt; she would have found means to retaliate. Of more significance, however, is that Becky's nature is much too similar to Sir Pitt's: both are extremely ambitious and power-conscious--Becky for social power, Sir Pitt for

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[10] *Vanity Fair*, p.82.

political. The marriage between them therefore cannot be effected because they will prove to be compatible. This would defeat Thackeray's role for Becky in *Vanity Fair*. Becky therefore has to marry Rawdon, who proves to be a misfit in her scheme of things, but their marriage would serve as an illustration for one of Thackeray's concerns.

If the main target of *Vanity Fair*'s attack is social pretensions, then an important secondary attack is aimed at cultivated sex-discrimination. From what we see of marriages in the novel, it is obvious that Thackeray thinks that the sexes should enjoy equal and frank relationships based upon similar interests and values. Vanity Fair's discriminations are cultivated, not genetically inherited, as evidenced by the manner in which children, such as Georgy and Rawdy, are brought up. We may argue that Becky's determination to secure herself a husband and a position in society is the result of poverty, and that her nature is inherent, but the calculated means by which she goes about actualizing her ambitions show that she is a self-motivated character.

Though strongly individualized and capable of self-motivation, Becky is nevertheless a product of Vanity Fair. Her success and failure are therefore ultimately determined by the members of her society because she embodies the same values as they. However, she carries their negative values to the extreme, and is thus irreconcilable with them.

Vanity Fair is a tightly structured and orderly organization with well defined social boundaries to divide each class of citizen. There are prescribed roles for every member of each social stratum so that it is not easy for an individual to stray from his own social responsibilities. Such a structure, therefore, has little room for an outsider with such a dubious origin as Becky's. In order for her to succeed, we are forced to recognize the fact that a balance has to be struck from a combination of Amelia's sensibility and Becky's ambitions. This balance, perhaps, can best be seen in the depiction of Lady O'Dowd. She is probably what may be considered a better wife and mother than either Becky or Amelia: though garrulous, she is loving and practical. The chapter "The Girl I Left Behind" provides an excellent example of her as a touchstone to measure and emphasize not only the negative aspects of Becky, but also to bring out the grotesqueness of Amelia's exaggerated sentimentality. The episode creates the different aspects of three characters caught in a similar situation, and shows the totally different reactions to the call-to-war of the three wives: on the two extremes are Becky, being all mind and no heart, and Amelia, being all heart and no mind, with Lady O'Dowd in the middle providing the balance. But because Becky has no such balance, she has to be segregated. Ultimately, we see her safely ensconced in her little booth looking on at life as it goes on in Vanity Fair. Thus at the end of the novel, Becky becomes an observer of life in

Vanity Fair, just as the narrator is.

We see, then, that Becky is a personification of the various social types of Vanity Fair. She is used merely as a focal point to assemble and project the various negative aspects of her society. And because she does not belong to any particular social class, the author can mobilize her easily on the social ladder of Vanity Fair to represent the tendencies of each class, but without endowing her with any particular class pretense or idiosyncracy. Her role in this respect is thus complementary to that of the narrator.

V. GOLDEN LOTUS

We have noted in a previous chapter that the Chinese title of *The Golden Lotus* is derived from the names of three of the novel's major characters: Golden Lotus, Lady of the Vase, and Plum Blossom. The hierarchial position in which the names appear in the title is also indicative of the degree of importance each of these three women is accorded in the novel. As Golden Lotus is evidently the most important character, this chapter will focus on the discussion of her role in the book, though with relevance to the concern of this thesis, all three of them may be considered as sirens. In order to explore the role of Golden Lotus more fully, it will be necessary to examine Vase as well, because apart from the fact that Vase embodies elements of the siren, an important relationship exists between her and Golden Lotus. We will also have to determine Hsiao Hsiao-sen's intent in his work, and to examine how he develops Golden Lotus as a character to play the role that she is assigned.

In his book *Thackeray*, Anthony Trollope maintains that one of the responsibilities of a good novelist is to instruct as well as to entertain.'[8]' Although this remark is made by a Victorian artist writing in nineteenth-century

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'[8]'*Thackeray*, p.202.

England, Hsiao can be said to have operated along similar lines. The relevance of Trollope's statement is therefore pertinent to Hsiao. In the preface to *The Golden Lotus*, Hsiao signifies his intent to instruct when he has the narrator hint that after reading the work, thereby having learnt a lesson on how to free ourselves from the mortifications of the world, we may "then purify our senses and put upon the garment of repentance."[1] Of the evils of the world--wine and women, wealth and ambition--Hsiao sees wealth and women as being the greatest evils and the most potentially destructive: "Experience would seem to show that of the four evils, women and wealth must surely bring disaster."[2] The crux of *The Golden Lotus* therefore rests upon the intention to illustrate how these two evils can bring fatal consequences on those who court them.

The main target of Hsiao's attack in the novel is degenerated morality brought about by the possession of wealth and women. Morality, both in thoughts and behavior, in *The Golden Lotus* is not regulated by any religion, because the religions and their representatives portrayed in the novel are often treated with contempt. Instead, it is governed by an unofficial form of Confucianism based upon a doctrine of loyalty and service. Such a doctrine is echoed by Golden Lotus when she remarks: "In my opinion...the maid who spread the scandal ought to be beaten to death. It was

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[1] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.4.
[2] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.1.

her duty as a maid to be loyal to her employer."[1] The doctrine of duty is also apparent in the relationship between husband and wife:

> It is traditionally a man's duty to attend to matters outside the household and a woman's to govern within it, but over and over again a man's good repute has been brought to nothing by his wife. Why is this? It is because he has not treated his wife as the Sacred Principle requires. The relations between husband and wife should be based upon a generosity of spirit that gives rise to mutual understanding and brings their feelings into complete accord. When this is the case, the husband sets the tune and the wife follows; there is no reason to anticipate trouble.[2]

This being the case, characters who violate this doctrine are inevitably caused to suffer retribution. The result is that when they permit personal desires and emotions to take precedence over the performance of social duties, the narrator shows very little sympathy, and such violators are invariably made to suffer gruesomely tragic fates.

Love, as Hsiao sees it, has degenerated in the hedonistic society of *The Golden Lotus* into a purely physical form, for somehow in the social confusion, it has lost its purity and its aesthetic meaning. This loss is detrimental not only to the men in Golden Lotus' society, but also to the women as well. Hsiao's purpose in the novel therefore is to demonstrate the various effects of love and its physical manifestations on the various members of the society.

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[1] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.IV, p.20.
[2] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.197.

The focus of the criticisms in *The Golden Lotus* is aimed at the newly-risen bourgeoisie, represented by Hsi-men. This class of citizens, through the acquisition of wealth, often by unethical business dealings and immoral means, has acquired an authoritative political voice in its society, thereby giving it a power to exert influences on the lives and fates of the other members. Unfortunately, these same elitists lack the intellectual capability and discrimination in social and human affairs. The result is an inability to cultivate and nurture a keener appreciation of the heart and mind. The consequence of this, too, is that the influences they exert upon their society are often negative ones. Thus we see Hsi-men as a character who is unscrupulous and unprincipled in his pursuit of hedonism. Yet, if we examine his activities carefully, his life reflects a state of extreme confusion. And as there is no order in his life, there is also none in his social environment, both within and without his domestic circle. Caught amidst this state of disorder is Golden Lotus, whose chaotic life is the direct result of her misgoverned society. She is the female counterpart to Hsi-men, and is used as a mirror to reflect the chaos in her society; for Hsiao's purposes, she becomes the image of moral corruption: a woman in whom "a two-edged sword lurks between her thighs."[113]

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[113] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.1.

Our initial conception of the kind of women we are to encounter in the novel is foreshadowed by the last stanza of the verse which opens the *The Golden Lotus*:

> Beautiful is this maiden; her tender form gives promise of sweet womanhood,
> But a two-edged sword lurks between her thighs, whereby destruction comes to foolish men.
> No head falls to that sword: its work is done in secret,
> Yet it drains the very marrow from men's bones.'[113]

At this point, there is no indication that this stanza is a description of any particular woman, for we soon discover that most of the female characters in the novel are endowed with such destructive capability. However, as we follow the careers each, we realise that none of them warrant such a description as much as Golden Lotus. And this becomes even more obvious when the same stanza is repeated in Chapter Seventy-nine of Volume IV to foreshadow the death of Hsi-men after his fatal sexual encounter with Golden Lotus. The sword image is therefore an appropriate image to exemplify the destructive power of Golden Lotus because in the course of her struggles for fulfilment, she is also responsible for the murders of Wu Ta and Kuan Ko, as well as being the cause of the deaths of Vase, Wistaria, and the downfall of Ching-chi.

On a couple of occasions, Golden Lotus is also called a "nine-tailed fox."[114] In Chinese mythology and literary tradition, the fox evokes a particular image: beautiful but deadly, intelligent in a cunning way, is seductive and

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[113] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.1.
[114] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.II, p.14; Vol.III, p.379.

engages in illicit sexual liaisons. In one of his studies, Edward T. Werner offers this explanation:

> Generally, the fox is a creature of ill-omen, long-lived (living to eight hundreds or even a thousand years), with a peculiar virtue in every part of his body, able to produce fire by striking the ground with his tail, cunning, cautious, sceptical, able to see into the future, to transform himself (usually into old men, or scholars, or pretty young maidens), and fond of playing pranks and tormenting mankind.'''

In another study on Chinese folklores, Nicholas B. Dennys remarks: "The fox was understood to be most mischievously inclined, and was especially mischievous in its domestic relations."''' All of the above characteristics attributed to the fox can be found in the nature of Golden Lotus; and the seductive beauty, cunning and evil evoked by this image are strangely familiar to those evoked by the siren.

While the siren image is not used to portray Golden Lotus, yet Golden Lotus manifests many of the features that we have seen as being characteristics of the siren. For example, she sings and plays the lute beautifully, can drink wine as a fish can drink water, is well skilled in the art of seduction, and is beautiful with eyes that are "clear and cool."''' Such features are all appealing to men like Hsi-men, but they all possess a negative moral connotation. Other descriptive passages of her establish aspects of Golden Lotus as being atypical of the deadly and destructive

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'''Edward T. C. Werner, *Asian Folklore and Social Life Monographs*, Vol.103, Lou Tsu-K'uang, ed. Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1979, p.49.

'''Nicholas Dennys, *The Folklores of China*. Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1968, p.95.

'''*The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.42.

siren:

> Her feet were graced by tiny shoes made like mountain-crow, with tips embroidered to look like claws. Their high heels were of white silk, so that she seemed always to walk upon a fragrant dust. Her scarlet silk trousers were decorated with birds and flowers and, as she sat or when she rose, the wind would puff out her skirts and flowing undergarments. From her mouth there came a perfume as delicious as that of orchids and musk, while her cherry lips and beautiful cheeks had the glory of a flower. One glimpse of this vision, and the souls of men would flutter away and die. Many handsome young men might perish at the sight.'''

Although the narrator in such descriptions of Golden Lotus grants her a beauty which demands our admiration, Golden Lotus' beauty is systematically undercut with many negative effects. When we re-examine the passage quoted above, we realise that although her tiny feet, a Chinese symbol of feminine beauty,''' are encased in exquisitely tiny shoes, the shoe-tips are "embroidered to look like claws," and though the dust she walks upon is fragrant, it is nevertheless still dust. The whole effect is that Golden Lotus may present an image of extraordinary beauty, yet the vision is deadly to those who look at her. By further contrasting her beauty with the ugly deformity of Wu Ta, the narrator is able to instil a sense of grotesqueness into her beauty.

To say that Golden Lotus is created from a strictly moral model, however, is to oversimplify her character and

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'''*The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.43.

'''One notes that Thackeray seems also to consider small feet a symbol of beauty. All of his "beautiful" characters: Becky, Rosie, Beatrix, and even Colonel Newcomes, are endowed with tiny feet.

the role she plays, for under her sirennic surface are a host of other things which, because of her chaotic life, are difficult to define. We do gradually, however, become aware of the fact that she too craves for a life of love. Floundering in a sea of hedonism, she unfortunately misdefines the term and views love and its manifestations quantitatively instead of looking at it in terms of its qualitative values. And while the narrator is evidently conscious of her often pathetic situations, it is not within Golden Lotus' power to behave differently from the manner which her society prescribes her to behave. Our perception of her often risks the danger of being blurred by the attention focussed on her somewhat jaded and sensational career, so that we tend to overlook the fact that her behavior, aspirations and responses are essentially restricted by and aligned to the nature and limitation of her sex. And because her motives are conscious and her actions calculated, she is subject to social evaluation and inquisition. As a result, conflict between her aspiration and the opportunities for her to actualize her ambition is inevitable. Ultimately, social mores become decisive factors in determining her fate.

As we probe deeper into the character of Golden Lotus, we realise that not only our perception of her has been blurred, but that Golden Lotus herself has misconceived the human situation. An example of this is her misadventure with Wu Sung in which she misconstrues both the human situation

and a man's heart. Wu Sung is an example of the incorruptible hero who, owing to his respect for traditional values, is not susceptible to the sirennic wiles of Golden Lotus, and is thus immune to her. Golden Lotus, however, is unable to see the heroic nature of Wu Sung, and unwisely decides to seduce him. In his fight for justice, and out of his piety for his brother, Wu Sung assumes upon himself the burden of bringing Golden Lotus to judgement, and consequently becomes instrumental in her final tragedy.

Apart from the realization that Golden Lotus, in the pursuit of her dreams of romance, has misconceived the human heart, we also discover that her society has ill-prepared her for her role as a wife.

In *The Golden Lotus*, women allegedly need to be married because they seem to have no satisfactory alternative to serving the needs of men in order to fulfill their function in life. Thus we see Hsi-men's wives displaying considerable concern as to how to fill their time. Furthermore, they all appear to be no better or worse than they should be: the virtuous wife is expected to perform her wifely duties as prescribed, and to ask for no more. Under such circumstances, we may speculate that Golden Lotus would have been better off if she had become a courtesan. But for a woman with her kind of dream, life as a promiscuous courtesan is not a really feasible alternative. A courtesan's main concern in *The Golden Lotus* is the acquisition of wealth without having to devote too much of

her affection to any particular man; Golden Lotus is not overly concerned with wealth, but seeks to monopolize the affection of Hsi-men. Her pursuit takes the form of a quest for a second-rate romantic love lost in a degenerated society. Her tragedy springs from unfulfilled dreams begotten by a society whose corruption is displayed in its various aspects: domestic, social, political, moral, religious, and aesthetical. Trapped in this web, Golden Lotus suffers because a romantic ideal has miscarried, for in the social chaos, she loses sight of what she wants and succeeds in finding for her cravings only obscure dreams filled with temporal properties. The result is that we see her flitting from affair to affair with increasing concern, but with no excessive anxiety.

The image that we conceive of her as an outsider is also fundamental to Golden Lotus' role in the novel. It creates the tension and conflict in her relationship with Vase, and provides the basis for the two women to play antithetical roles. The same image also sets Golden Lotus apart from the other female characters in her social milieu, thereby creating further conflict between her and her society. In this respect, we see Golden Lotus playing the role of a misfit.

In spite of her seemingly endless stream of affairs, we see that Hsi-men is the man whom Golden Lotus may learn truly to love, and who is capable of fulfilling her dreams, for in him is that balance of wealth and sexual prowess

which seems to be so vital in ensuring security and happiness in the society of *The Golden Lotus*. Throughout the course of their relationship, Golden Lotus plays the role of the seductress and temptress--not an unusual role for a siren--to win and dominate Hsi-men's affection. Yet unlike her other affairs, such as the one with Ching-chi, social expectations are not the basis for their conflict. Rather, personal traits and individual perception of life are. While Hsi-men is the typical rake who pays no attention to affairs of the heart, for he himself displays little emotion in his sexual escapades, Golden Lotus exhibits a wide spectrum of human emotions. And while Hsi-men expects little fidelity from his sexual partners, and observes none himself, Golden Lotus seeks to dominate her relationships. In the process of her development, we see the narrator following her temperament as it changes from frustration and anger to loneliness and despair, creating moods when the unendurable boredom of existence in a large household without men--the object of her search for love--incapacitates her and drives her to desperation. In such instances, we see Golden Lotus cast in the role of the neglected wife, and our sympathy for her miserable situation is aroused, especially when we see her confronting her loneliness and her sense of hopelessness:

> She felt the loneliness of her curtained bed, the coldness of its dainty coverlets. One day, she opened the corner gate and lighted the silver lamp in her room. She leaned upon the screen and played her lute. It was about midway between the second and the third night-watches. Several times she sent Plum

Blossom to look for her husband, but Plum Blossom could never see him.

Through the long night she played her silver lute, but the room seemed so lonely that she could not bear to continue. Then she took the lute and laid it upon her knees. She played softly to herself and sang

I rested sadly on the lattice
Then sought my rest without undressing.

Suddenly, she thought she heard a sound on the gong outside and imagined it was Hsi-men's signal. Hastily, she bade Plum Blossom go out to see. "You were mistaken, Mother," Plum Blossom said when she returned, "it was only the wind. It is going to snow." Then Golden Lotus sang again.

I hear the sound of the wind
The snow is fluttering against my window
And the ice-flower drifting one by one.

The lamp grew dim, and the incense burned out. She would have drawn the wick, but there was no sign of Hsi-men Ch'ing. She could not summon energy enough to touch it. She sang again.

I am too languid to trim the jewelled lamp
I am too languid to light the incense
I make shift to pass the night
Dreading the morrow that must come.
When I think of you, how shall my sadness end?
When I think of you, my mind is consumed.
You have despoiled my tender years,
the flower of my youth.
You have deserted me.
You have not fulfilled the promise
you made me in days gone by.'[130]

As may be expected, Golden Lotus dwells upon her dismal condition primarily in terms of affection and unfulfilled promises, and the heartlessness of her lover. This is evident enough to convince us of the serious nature of her distress caused by an unrealized dream. The sympathy we feel for her here is the same as the one we feel for Vase later in Vase's career: Golden Lotus is meant to be a distasteful character, but an alternative sentiment is provoked because we also see in her a character who endures familiar human

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[130] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.II, pp.161-162.

experiences. Even if in our loneliness we are not inclined to break into melancholic songs in the middle of the night, we are able to identify with her pains, her feelings of neglect and her misery.

When we examine the entire episode more thoroughly, we detect very little trace of compassion and sympathy in the tone of the narrator. This is not because the narrator refuses to acknowledge that Golden Lotus may be more capable of feelings than she is depicted to be, but because, we suspect, he cannot accept, and probably does not enjoy, the sentimental illusion evoked in such a depiction. And all this is due to the fact that Golden Lotus is meant to play the role of the siren to exemplify the evil and destructiveness of women which he speaks about in his preface to the novel. Such being the case, Golden Lotus should not be expected to be capable of fine sentiments. The result is that the more persistently Golden Lotus pursues her dream of love, the more it is manifested into a kind of forced sensuality, compelling her to resort to artifice.

Ultimately, we are not wrong in saying that Golden Lotus displays the characteristics of a siren. Even she sees herself as a misfit and an outcast, finding diluted gratification and challenge in every role she plays. In the process, her professionalism as a siren develops and becomes thorough. Simultaneously, in the frenzy to achieve her ambition, she loses track of the true meaning of love and degenerates into a state in which she becomes obsessed with

the general and temporal delights of its physical aspect--an aspect which to a considerable extent has been suppressed and frustrated by the long years of marriage to the "Tom Thumb,"[13] Wu Ta. Her excessive energy in sexual activities after she meets Hsi-men gives the impression that she is making up for the opportunities lost during those years. However, it may be viewed as being both a reaction against the austere, and sexually ungratified, condition of her situation, as well as a resistance against her society's unequal treatment of the sexes and its differing attitudes towards married and unmarried women.

Intent on using Golden Lotus to illustrate the evils of women, the narrator repeatedly casts her into roles that cannot fail to exemplify the various negative aspects of the siren. For example, Golden Lotus has no maternal instinct and sees children as obstacles in her path to Hsi-men's heart. In order to get rid of such obstacles, she plots the death of Kuan Ko. In preparing Golden Lotus for the role of an angel of death, the narrator recounts portions of the history of her past. We are told that at fifteen, she is sold to Master Chang who, from taking too much sexual liberty with her, is stricken with some form of venereal disease from which he eventually dies. This should have been enough indication to warn us of Golden Lotus' deadly power, but as she herself displays no sign of being afflicted by the disease, our suspicion gradually peters out. However,

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[13] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.24.

when Hsi-men also dies of a disease, as a result of a sexual encounter with her, and shows symptoms which are not unlike those exhibited by Chang, we realise that Golden Lotus is a carrier of an infection which can cause death to those who come into contact with her. Seen in a symbolical manner, however, Golden Lotus is merely a transmitter of social diseases--diseases which have been inflicted upon her by her society, and with which she in turn affects those who associate with her.

In the development of Golden Lotus' role as a seductress, we see that the narrator is manipulating sirennic stereotypes so that the image that Golden Lotus projects makes her acceptance into Hsi-men's social milieu problematic, but not impossible. For example, the physical features of Golden Lotus are described in terms which strongly convey the evil and threatening power of the siren, but such descriptions do not render her unattractive. The manner in which Golden Lotus makes use of her dress and appearance to accentuate her desire and seductive intention should also indicate to us that art is employed to supplement natural beauty: "Her milk-white breast was partially uncovered, and her disordered hair was like a beautiful cloud. Desire had given colour to her cheeks."[122] Her breast, and in fact her entire beauty, is dangerous in a familiar way once we have established the sirennic nature of Golden Lotus, but her threatening beauty will be seen to be

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[122] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, pp.34-35.

different from the attractiveness of Vase.

The same quality of being an outsider, a misfit who is both dangerous and attractive, is also discernible in the manner in which she conducts herself. At the party given by Vase to celebrate the Feast of Lanterns,

> Golden Lotus flaunted her silken sleeves and pointed with her fine fingers, showing off the gold rings on them. She leaned half out of the window, biting melon seeds and throwing the skins at passers-by....Suddenly, a gust of wind made a large hole in the lower part of the old woman-lantern, and Golden Lotus laughed merrily. People standing below the window stared at her, crowding till they almost trampled on each other. There were several dissolute young fellows among them. They pointed at the woman, and began to discuss her.'[13]

Thus we see Golden Lotus unable to conduct herself as appropriate to her proper station as a wife of the most powerful and influential man in her society. Her behavior is thoroughly incongruous with that of Hsi-men's other ladies, and this makes it difficult for her to be assimilated into their social milieu. Unlike the other wives, Golden Lotus' manner of dress and behavior are constantly used to emphasize her sexuality and her role as the seductress.

As a seductress, Golden Lotus differs from Hsi-men's other lovers in the sense that she actively pursues him even after they are married, and seeks to monopolize him with unguarded jealousy. Hsi-men, on the other hand, succumbs to the charm of the others without their having to exert too much effort. As wives, they assume their prescribed wifely duties and do not seem to overtly pursue him for sexual

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[13] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.209.

favours. The manner in which Hsi-men goes from one woman to another, not unlike the way a butterfly flits from one flower to the next, gives us the impression that his affairs with these women are not the result of their connivance, but rather that Hsi-men is a man who has no discrimination as far as sexual partners are concerned. Every woman he meets is a potential candidate for illicit sexual activities. Thus in this society, woman is seen primarily as a means for man to satisfy his biological instinct. And because this is the way Hsi-men sees Golden Lotus, he fails to see her as a human being who is quite capable of experiencing the entire range of human emotions. Lacking the respect for her heart and intellect, he therefore does not comprehend the fact that he has also violated her will and ambition.

Golden Lotus is not the only character in *The Golden Lotus* in the role of the seductress. In this connection, we will compare her with Vase.

The essence of Vase's character and action before she marries Hsi-men is essentially masculine in the sense that during their courtship, she does not accept, and is not impeded by, any of the social handicaps that members of her sex are subject to. To a great extent, she is also free from involuntary participation in activities expected of her feminine role. Although we cannot define the line between voluntary and involuntary participation in sex roles, we can find a wealth of evidence in *The Golden Lotus* to substantiate our thesis that Vase's response and conduct in

her affair with Hsi-men are not in tune with her society's expectations of a woman of her position. None of the social restrictions that are imposed upon women of her time and place seems to affect Vase or restrict her seduction of Hsi-men. And she makes no pretence of her confidence in her own ability to run and control her own life:

> We women certainly have our first marriages arranged for us, but for the rest we can surely please ourselves....My brother-in-law has not the slightest power to say a word in any matter that concerns myself alone. If I could not support myself, he would never raise a finger to help me. No, if that fellow dares fart about, I shall tell him to die in his chair, and after that, he will not venture to die in his bed.'[124]

In Vase then we see a very unconventional female, not in the sense that she does not regard marriage as the ultimate fulfilment of a woman's life, but rather in the sense that she is untypically ambitious, brave and independent, and does not make any pretence of her intentions. In short, she has the essence more of a siren than of a wife. In her relationships with men, we also see a reversal in the sex roles. Normally, a Chinese marriage is contracted with the male initiating the process, but in Vase's case, it is she who proposes to Hsi-men. In her affair with him, she appears to presume that marriage is the automatic result of their liaison, and therefore she formulates her plans towards this end. In the proposal scene, the art of the siren becomes apparent as Vase creates an atmosphere of intimacy:

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[124] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.226.

> She heated some excellent wine and served food to him [Hsi-men]. The lanterns were lighted in the hall and the curtains drawn. Charcoal was put into the golden brazier and precious incense into the incense-burner. She kotowed before him and offered him a cup of wine.'[125]

The atmosphere here is congenial for seduction; and indeed we see Vase exercising all her sirennic wiles to ensure her success in the seduction of Hsi-men. Yet when she unveils her body and soul to Hsi-men, he is unable to see a seductress, instead he sees a friend: Vase's plight and sympathy are as tempting to Hsi-men as Golden Lotus' dainty feet. And as he sees only the positive connotation of her beauty, he pays no attention to social stigma.

The progress of Vase from a siren to an angel in *The Golden Lotus* is a significant one when we compare her with Golden Lotus. As we follow her development, we see her in the role of a neglected young wife, a coquette and temptress, an unfulfilled wife whose unsatisfied sexuality turns her frustration into rage, and finally a mother and a respected and beloved mistress. Each stage of her career is marked by a seemingly insurmountable trial: she falls either physically or psychopathically ill at the end of each marriage, lies inert for a period of time before eventually recovering. During each of these periods of inactivity, we witness Vase being confronted with certain truths of her future and prospects, and as she gradually overcomes her tribulations, we see her develop as a character; it is only

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[125] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.217.

when she succumbs to the violation of Golden Lotus that she dies. As we follow Vase through her trials, it becomes increasingly clear that she is searching for a "harbour" to anchor in, away from the sieges of her decadent society. Floundering about, she goes through a series of three marriages: being single is not a viable alternative for a woman of her position. Both her two previous husbands were unable to provide Vase with the kind of security she needs; so when Hsi-men appears in her life, and she sees in him the same qualities that Golden Lotus sees in him, she embarks on a scheme to seduce, her ultimate aim being to marry him

After her marriage to Hsi-men, and especially after the birth of Kuan Ko which provides an anchor to further ensure her security and strengthen her domestic position, Vase's character undergoes a complete metamorphosis. In her relationships with her previous husbands, we see Vase embodying all the stereotypical elements of the siren: wanton, artful and formidable. After her entry into Hsi-men's household, she becomes a changed person. Her symbolic death in Chapter Nineteen of Volume I of *The Golden Lotus* marks the turning point in the development of Vase: she becomes repentant and is divested of her ruthlessness and unscrupulousness; she bears no grudges against those who use her ill, and accepts her fate without much bitterness. In short, she sheds her image of the siren and assumes the role of the angel.

The drastic transformation in the nature of Vase may appear incredible, but it is nevertheless necessary and significant. In developing her, her creator is able to incorporate stereotypes into her characterization without any particular feature dominating our perception of her as either a siren or an angel. In Vase, we see the progress of a siren's struggle being held in check and balanced by a reinforcement of her society's attitudes and customs. In order to institute this balance, the narrator chooses to cast Vase as an angel to be sacrificed to the siren in the latter half of Vase's career.

The transformation of Vase is significant too because it reveals to us that while Hsiao evidently takes an utilitarian approach to stereotypes, he will not hesitate to superimpose a new image upon his characters to further delineate their roles. And if the plot or function of a character necessitates a departure from the stereotypes, he is unafraid to create and add new material to facilitate such a departure. In the case of Vase, the departure from her initial sirennic image is necessary for two reasons. The first reason is that the plot compels Vase to become an antithesis to Golden Lotus in order to create conflicts between the age-old concept of good and evil. Consequently, the siren in Vase has to be transformed into an angel upon whom Golden Lotus can unleash the full fury of her jealousy and evil nature. This leads us to the second reason: Hsiao has to manipulate Vase in order to reaffirm the role that

Golden Lotus is assigned to play. In the portrayal of the relationship between Golden Lotus and Vase, we see Hsiao using Golden Lotus to further illustrate his thesis that "women...must surely bring disaster."[126]

The result of this manipulation of Vase is that while both women present a general picture of a sirennic woman, Vase is shown to demonstrate both her negative and positive qualities while the image projected by Golden Lotus is purely negative. Vase's faithlessness is due not so much to a straying heart as to a temporary dominance of the sirennic aspects of her nature. This dominance is provoked by a sense of unfulfilment because we detect that she does not willingly seek adventures; most of them seem to be thrust upon her by the necessity of her situations. Her ability to withstand her crises with enduring strength is in itself an indication of the angelic elements that are present in her nature, but which the narrator seems to deny her in the first half of her story.

In Golden Lotus, on the other hand, we witness an unchanged siren from beginning to end. Not reluctant to seize advantage of whatever opportunity that may avail itself, but not overly concerned with wealth and social mobility, Golden Lotus experiences a freedom unknown to Vase: the freedom to be moved up and down the social ladder with considerable ease, without such movements being disagreeable to her. Ultimately, she is the true victim on

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[126] *The Golden Lotus*, Vol.I, p.1.

two counts: in order to allow Vase to be developed, Golden Lotus remains unprogressive and unfulfilled; the narrator's tone is constantly hostile towards her, and he paints an overall immoral picture of her. Secondly, she is a victim not because she is clearly identified as a siren, but because the social conditions that she so fiercely struggles to overcome and reject are too strong for her, and as such, they ultimately overpower her.

The final tragedy of both women is gruesome; and especially in the case of Vase, we may feel that the conclusion to her life is unreasonably harsh. However, their tragic fates are necessary to reinforce the author's concept of retribution. The resolution of this concept necessitates the destruction, in one form or another, of violators of moral and social values. In comparison, then, the roles of the sirens in *The Golden Lotus* demonstrate to us that though moral complexity is recognised, moral relativity is not.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the preceding study, we have found that there is a remarkable similarity in Thackeray's and Hsiao's techniques in depicting the siren. Although both authors utilize omniscient narrators, the narrators do not exercise the full extent of their power of omniscience: they rarely delve into the minds of the characters to expose their thoughts. Instead, characters are studied mainly through external evidence such as their descriptions, dialogues, and their behaviour in relationships. Images, especially in *Vanity Fair*, are used extensively to depict the siren, and in *The Golden Lotus*, songs are often employed to portray her state of mind.

In order for us to determine the role of the siren in the novel, one of the elements to consider is the author's intent. In a letter to his mother, Thackeray remarks: "What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world."[127] In the creation of the personages in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray adheres faithfully to this intent: money is the god in Vanity Fair. Consequential to the possession of money is the social status and power that it brings. The drive to possess it is therefore the motivating force behind the men and women "whose horizon is limited and whose destiny is

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[127] *The Letters and Private Papers of W. M. Thackeray*, Vol.II, p.309.

determined by society"[128] in *Vanity Fair*. This drive can be seen in most of Thackeray's characters in the novel, and is especially accentuated in Becky. The siren in *Vanity Fair* then is used as a focal point on which her society's values are projected and made significant. As each character is pitted against her, she also serves to expose their hypocrisy and self-centredness, thereby revealing aspects of her society which the narrator may have neglected to comment on. As such, Becky's role becomes complementary to that of the narrator.

Thackeray's statement on "a set of people living without God" may also hold true in *The Golden Lotus*. There is a hypocritical streak in the depiction of man's relation to god in *The Golden Lotus*, because although god is constantly on the lips of the men and women in *The Golden Lotus*, he is very seldom in their hearts. The desire for sex forms the motivating force behind the struggles of many of the characters in the novel. To show how the insatiability of such a desire can bring destruction is one of Hsiao's purposes in *The Golden Lotus*, and Golden Lotus is cast in the role of a woman whose voracious appetite contributes to her tragedy and to the fatal downfall of many others. She plays the siren to illustrate the destructive potential of women who hunger for love and sex without taking into account their prescribed social duties. The modernity of *Vanity Fair* and *The Golden Lotus* therefore lies in their

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[128]Henri A. Talon, *Two Essays On Thackeray*. Dijon: Faculte des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, p.2.

authors' utilization of individual characters to reflect the state of their respective societies.'[129]

Within the structure of their respective societies, both sirens are also depicted as "outsiders." Becky, as Miss Pinkerton remarks, is "an outcast."'[130] The basis upon which she is so considered is her lack of money. Becky herself is aware of this; it accounts for her struggle, for as she comments: "What a charming reconciler and peace-maker money is."'[131] As a consequence of her struggle, she becomes disruptive to the society into which she tries to gain acceptance. As an outsider, she subsequently becomes also a dissenter.

Golden Lotus too is an outsider within the structure of Hsi-men's household. Recollecting that she is a slave, her marriage to Hsi-men to become his Fifth Lady represents an elevation in her social status. Though the marriage makes her equal in status to the other wives, it does not change or improve her moral attitude. Her moral behavior is incompatible with that of the other ladies, and she may therefore be considered an outsider. Because of her fierce struggle to monopolize her husband, she, like Becky, becomes a disruptive element in the otherwise peaceful social milieu of Hsi-men's household.

'[129]Uri Margolin, "Characterization in Narrative: Some Theoretical Prolegomena" in *Neophilologus*, 67, (1983), pp.1-14.
'[130]*Vanity Fair*, p98.
'[131]*Vanity Fair*, p.100.

In comparing Becky and Golden Lotus, the periods in which these two sirens operate must also be taken into consideration. It is possible to speculate that had Becky been born in the eighteenth-century, she would have chosen an alternate means to pursue her ambition. In Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*, we see a woman with the same nature and aspiration of Becky in the person of Beatrix Castlewood. The difference between these two sirens is that Beatrix openly exerts her physical beauty and feminine charms to scale the social ladder of an eighteenth-century society. Becky, however, lives in an era in which social mores demand that a woman display her sexual nature only in the sanctity of her boudoir. Living in an age of Victorian puritannism, Becky is thus forced to assume a facade of feminine virtues.

Golden Lotus, on the other hand, lives in a period in which social attitudes towards sex are more liberal and lax. It is a society in which courtesans openly and proudly ply their trade, and flourish. Activities of a sexual nature are generally looked upon with more tolerance than usual, but which, as Hsiao sees it, are the root of moral degeneration and social disintegration.

In many ways, Becky's world is much simpler and smaller than that of Golden Lotus. Because of its finely structured layers, members of each social class behave and and function according to prescribed and well defined codes. The world of Golden Lotus is not so finely stratified. There is much social mobility between the classes, the result of which is

a state not of freedom, but of confusion and chaos. Whether tightly or loosely structured, however, both societies by their very nature make it difficult for the sirens to successfully operate and to realise their aspirations.

In their portrayals of these two women, Thackeray and Hsiao exhibit a somewhat similar view. While both sirens are evidently meant to be "bad," there is also in them a sensitivity and liveliness, as well as an aloneness, which is attractive in its own way, and which cannot escape the scrutiny of an observer. At times, the narrator of *Vanity Fair* betrays a sympathetic tone to the extent that, in his treatment, the weakness of the angel tends to complement and recommend the strength of the siren. In *The Golden Lotus*, the narrator occasionally allows Golden Lotus to expose her emotions, thereby giving us a glimpse of the internal conflict between her heart and mind. In such rare exposures, however, we can detect neither sympathy nor compassion from the narrator; the tone in his treatment of Golden Lotus is generally harsh and hostile.

Both women, nevertheless, are seen as products and victims of their societies, and have no means of escaping from the webs in which they are trapped. Whether in condemning them, or in recommending them, Thackeray and Hsiao do not seem to be as critical of them as they are critical of society itself. To the authors, these sirens serve as mirrors to the world, for it is through their interaction with their environment that their creators

expose the various vices of their respective societies. It is through the eyes of Becky and Golden Lotus that the myriads of their societies are assembled and reflected; they are the agents who sum up in themselves the mentality of the societies of their time.

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